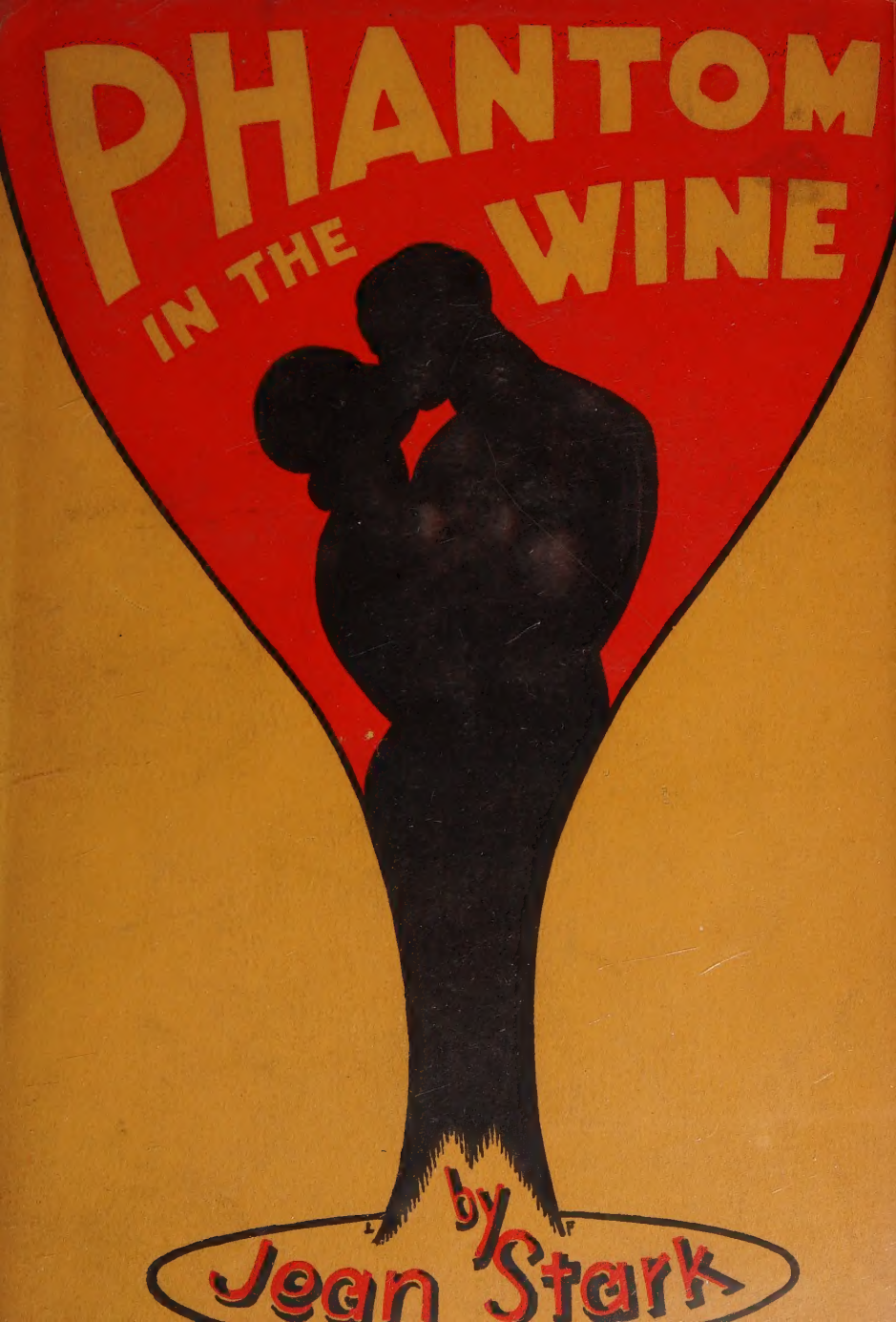
PHANTOM IN THE WINE



by Jean Stark

PHANTOM IN THE WINE

THIS is a defiant and impetuous first novel of passion and high laughter under the sun and stars of prewar Russia. A band of gypsies (and they are like no other gypsies of fact or fiction) come upon Nadya, an abandoned waif. As she grows up Nadya is torn from the wandering campfires by the advent in her life of two astonishing brothers, a pair of Russian aristocrats whose hatred of each other lays a red path for the book's climax. The story of romantic passion is set against a background of eccentric aunts, Dickensian servants and gypsy philosophers.

PHANTOM IN THE WINE

BY

JEAN STARK

1929
SIMON AND SCHUSTER INC.
NEW YORK

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37 WEST 57 STREET NEW YORK
PRINTED IN U. S. A. BY VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, BINGHAMTON
BOUND BY H. WOLFF EST., N. Y.
DESIGNED BY ANDOR BRAUN

THE BOOKS

BOOK ONE

PAGE

Blood Brothers 3

BOOK TWO

The Lizard's Son 55

BOOK THREE

A Lady Hates to Be Alone 85

BOOK FOUR

"Wisdom Waits Across Your Threshold, Madam!" . 109

BOOK FIVE

Phantom in the Wine 145

BOOK SIX

Child of Storm 189

BOOK SEVEN

God Has No Tears; He Is Too Tired 209

To

RICHARD STANLEY NUGENT

BOOK ONE

BLOOD BROTHERS

I

"I SUPPOSE," said Old Appalonia grumpily, "that if the Lord God Himself told you that those two boys had horns aplenty, you would look terribly surprised? I suppose that I am chattering just to hear myself chatter? I suppose that I am a disagreeable old woman bent on mischief? . . . Well, I'm not."

She was one of those women who look a million years old from the very moment of a none too fortunate birth and her grumpiness sat upon her like a witch's cap. She whisked away the cakes and tea served a half hour before to her master, Alexis. However great his estate and illustrious his title, he wore an everyday belted smock of natural linen, and tapped strong fingers in apparent absent-mindedness against his waist. Frosty, more glacially blue than any wintry sky, his eyes had been regarding her for a long time.

"I don't doubt you in the least," he observed quietly. "I was merely going to suggest—"

"You do," interrupting crossly. "You say, 'I don't doubt you in the least,' but your eyes say, 'I think if you would talk less and think more, there wouldn't be so much trouble all the time.' . . . I know. Igor says I'm a silly old woman and should leave some things to nature. But nature, I say," flourishing a napkin, "is even sillier. If their wonderful sainted mother were alive, she—"

"She would feel exactly as you do," Alexis admitted cleverly.

Old Appa became very glum. "That's just what I might

expect. Mollify me, then. Whenever I tell you something that I feel you should know, and it isn't pleasant, you always try to mollify me."

"We always try to mollify the people we love, Appa."

Unexpectedly a tear ran down to her ugly mouth. She wiped away the traitorous drop, sniffed, faced about uncertainly to kiss his hand, and rushed out of the room. At the threshold she paused, balancing the tray against her stomach, her voice mild.

"I shall send them in to you, then." Her glance fixed itself securely on his crossed knee. "Do give them a good talking-to. You really ought to give them a good talking-to at least twice a week. It's extremely good for their souls, if the little wretches have any!" When another tear seemed about to escape her quivering lids, she averted her gaze, plucked a cake from the tray and bit into it unconsciously as the door closed upon her.

Alexis smiled. Old Appa had a most alarming way upon occasion of appearing to be quite cross-eyed, due, in all probability, to the misguided damming of a great affection. "Ask Igor, if you will, to find them for me," he had requested. Something, of course, would have to be done; they should not be permitted to worry Appa into a spasmodically sorry state. Michael appeared to have certain qualities for good but Feodor housed every conceivable deviltry inside his handsome head.

Had he but known it they were even then enticing a gypsy boy into the orchard with a promise of cherished early fruit. His name was Martyn, he said, and his dark eyes were suspicious. How did he know, he asked reasonably, but what they had some nefarious plan up their sleeves? To get him to pick the cherries, for instance, and then hold him up for a thief? That had been done before to an acquaintance of his, except that the loot had been apples, and

then the dear new little playmates had been given the apples for a reward for catching the thief.

"You ought to know just by looking at us that we wouldn't play you such a trick. Don't be a fool." Feodor grew impatient. "My brother and I can pick the cherries and you watch out for Igor, then. Does that suit you any better? You let us know if he comes, and then we will all make off with the stuff."

"Who's Igor? Why doesn't he want you to pick the cherries? They belong to you, don't they?"

"Certainly they do." Michael whittled his stick. "But Igor has an idea that if it weren't for him, the whole estate would fall in pieces. So he watches everything. All the time. He's probably right."

"And he's always suspicious of everything we do, so we try to keep him annoyed. At least I do, because he's funny most of the time," Feodor explained. "I honestly believe that when he doesn't catch us at something or other during the day, it spoils his night's sleep. But this isn't getting us anywhere. Do you want a lot of cherries or not? And if you don't, how is it we caught you prowling around in the beet field across the way?"

Martyn clenched a fist. "I don't prowl anywhere!" he cried furiously. "I walked in there because I wondered what the beginning of this estate looked like. It looked beautiful from the first road we took. And what's more, if I'd seen anything I wanted, I would have taken it. I don't prowl."

The sons of Alexis regarded him admiringly. Feodor apologized elaborately, went on at length about the splendid creed wherein a man in all faith and no conscience could take what he desired. "That's my idea of living," he declared largely. "A short life and a merry one. Take what you want and to the devil with the rest."

"You talk exactly like that silly Cossack who was here last winter." Michael soberly put away his knife. "Sit down, Martyn; it never seems to occur to Feodor to ask anyone to sit down. This silly Cossack I just mentioned came down here to visit us and Feodor has had the idea ever since that the fool was God in an astrakhan coat."

"I haven't!"

"You have," calmly. "I've seen you strutting around just the way that he used to—of course, only when you think no one sees you. And when you sit down, you do it with a flourish like his, as if that magnificent astrakhan skirt had to be made the most of. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you went off somewhere to practice twirling your moustache. I suppose you intend to have a moustache?"

Martyn grinned at Feodor's rage. Michael was entertained by the grin. It was warm, enveloping, promising all manner of secret jolly things about the gypsy boy's nature.

"How long are you going to camp around these parts, Martyn?"

"As long as you have cherries. And other nice things. And as long as you don't have your vegetable fields guarded too closely, though our band doesn't eat as much as you might suppose. We'll work for our vegetables, if we must, but the Lizard is against that. She—"

"The Lizard!" Feodor shot away from the tree trunk supporting his spine. "For the love of heaven, what a name!"

"She's my mother," indifferently, "and the queen of our band."

Feodor could not contain his curiosity. "Does she look like a lizard?"

"Not quite."

"Well, then, I certainly don't see the point in calling the woman a lizard. A man has to have some feelings about his mother. I should think you'd have some about yours."

"They called her the Lizard before I was even born," Martyn informed them carelessly, "because they said that every lover that she ever took changed her so. But that's none of your business."

"Quite right," Michael approved. "We didn't mean to get you involved in all these answers, did we, Feodor? We just wanted you to know that we liked you and wanted to see you again. We had better get the cherries before Feodor gets an entirely new idea of what he wants to do."

Igor did not appear to augment the excitement of their adventure and the three lay on their backs in the orchard. They were nibbling cherries and valiantly tried to whistle through mouthfuls of the small stones.

"Look," Feodor commanded, "I can do anything I want to." He thrust more stones into his already bulging cheeks. "Listen." Then he made a sound, a frightful noise that might have been expected with a degree of justice from a maddened cat, and became pale immediately afterward.

"What's the matter?" His brother sat bolt upright. "Did you swallow some of the stones?"

Feodor blurted, "Will they make cherry trees grow up inside of me? Appa told me once they would!"

"What a thought for a big brave Cossack!" Michael and Martyn rolled over and over in the grass and shrieked with laughter. On recovering from their paroxysm, they found Feodor regarding them balefully.

"So you think I was frightened, do you? Well, I wasn't and I can prove it." Martyn muttered some disparaging opinion, earning an angry, "I suppose you think you're brave? Well, I dare you to go down in our dungeon!"

"A real dungeon or something you two have made up?" choosing another cluster of fruit. "I don't intend going down into any little boys' dungeons. They're stupid."

"We're as old as you are. Anyway, ours is a real dungeon,

I'll tell you." Michael rubbed a cherry against the bridge of his nose. "Appa told us that some relative of the Mad Czar saw it at one time and said it had nice possibilities! It has, too. Feodor and I play down there sometimes but we're not supposed to. Igor gets the next thing to hysterics."

Martyn began to fancy the game. "Has it any torture chambers?"

"Certainly." Feodor gave him a withering look. "But we've never seen them. Oh, you needn't smile like that—there are all kinds of things but they're behind bolted doors. We have tried prying them open but either they can't be pried or Igor tracks us down. The old fool."

"Do keep quiet about him," Michael spoke warmly. "If it weren't for his being around as much as he is, both of us would have broken our necks long ago and you know it, or ought to. Anyway, Martyn, Alexis keeps sending him after us. It isn't that he cares so much but Appa puts him up to it, telling him things, and I suppose he feels he must. He doesn't object so very much to anything we do, except the dungeon. That really makes him furious."

Feodor laughed. "He said that the next time we went down, he would give us a choice flogging. I wonder if he would actually do that or talk to us instead for two hours about the responsibilities of his sons and how he wants them to grow beautifully into their men's estate. I'm very tired of that kind of talk. It used to amuse me, though."

Martyn finished chewing at a blade of grass and stood up, lean and dark and somehow strangely gallant in the frayed colors of his wandering breed. Legs spread apart, he leaned back, stretching so that muscles of his arms played to bronze beneath the sun's charmed light. His eyes, half-moons of a more subtle Tartar race, observing the sons of the Baron Alexis, mocked them afterward.

"The dungeon," he queried softly, "that the Mad Czar's relation seemed to think so much of?"

As they led the way his own legs leisurely took a better path, their contour not badly rounded by a too youthful acquaintance with a horse. A child born in the night, he was happiest in darkness when astride his beast, both of them like creatures possessed of articulate deviltry flying down silent stretches of roads that were silver ribbons of enchantment beneath the moon. Behind him rode the Lizard and her band, slowly, languorously, as a lizard should travel in justice to tradition. Before many hours they would come upon him and he would tell them which town smelled of prosperity, what village seemed willing to harbor them for a night, what street was eager to throw kopecks for an hour's amusement. Things like these the Lizard's son lived for, loved, but now he was wearied of these children of a nobleman. They had amused him for a moment; the Lizard's band needed food and rest while he himself had felt the need for friendliness of a sort. Perhaps if he were civil, they would speak to their father and, human nature being what it was, the Baron might freely give them vegetables and fruit, perhaps some geese or hens. And if he did not feel such kindliness obligatory, they would take those anyway, but not, of course, until they were ready to ride again on the glamorous wings of night. It was the Lizard's experience that few people cared to bestir themselves for pursuit after dark.

"Ugh!" shivered Martyn. "What an absolute nightmare of a hole! And do you mean to tell me that you two enjoy playing down here?" He looked down the staircase with horror. "Both of you must be idiots. Why, you could screech for hours in a place like this and no one would ever hear you!"

"That makes it all the more exciting," Feodor told him. "Come on down here. You're not afraid, are you?"

"I'm afraid of nothing but I hate being uncomfortable. Can you see what you're doing down there? I can barely see you. Are you sure you're not a devil? Your voice sounds like one!" Very carefully he was feeling his way down to them, and fell against Michael who was seriously attempting to open a mysterious door.

"Fool, why don't you use your knife?" demanded Feodor irritably.

"I am afraid I'll break it. Alexis said this one would have to last more than two weeks or he would see to it that I'd have to manufacture my own. Imagine that, if you can."

"You behave so nicely most of the time that I imagine he would supply you with a new knife every day on general principles, if he had to. Oh, did that really *open?*" stumbling toward his brother in disbelief.

Michael grumbled, "It's only another of those wine coolers or whatever it was they cooled. How many of the things are down here, anyway? I've been inside three of them already and that's plenty."

"It is, is it?" Feodor chuckled, sending his brother headlong into the dark space. He pulled the door to himself and hung to the bolt like a leech. "When you have taken the measurements, I'll think of letting you out!"

Martyn bellowed angrily. "What a miserable trick, you young rat! Let him out, I say! I'll knock you down, you—"

"I'm all right, Martyn," the victim's labored breath reached him. "It's only a wine cooler . . . I think."

"What of that? Supposing it had been one of those torture chambers or something? He might just as easily have killed you!" Still shouting he flung himself on Feodor and they rolled over on the damp stone floor, raging, tearing at each other's hair. Feodor did not seem to be above an

attempt at eye-gouging so Martyn kicked him in utter sincerity wherever he found opportunity and finally sat on his stomach. So Michael found them and when he told them that the room seemed less than four feet long, the gypsy burst into helpless laughter. "Well, you *are* a cool one to think of that when I would have waited only to come out and punch this fellow's face. Now, Feodor, we shall let you get up but if you don't behave yourself, you'll find we can show you a good trick or two . . . trying to gouge a person's eyes!"

Michael dusted off his shoulders. "He's getting worse all the time," he offered in apology. "I don't know where he gets half of his wretched ideas. I never used to believe that people were born with devils in them but I'm beginning to think there's some truth in it."

Martyn stood up, glaring in the darkness at Feodor who scrambled to his feet. "Oh, you needn't mutter to yourself. I think you're a rat and I don't care who knows it. I wouldn't mind telling the Baron. And if Michael had any sense, he'd stick you in here in one of those things himself, and let you think a few things out for yourself. What you need is several whippings."

"I suppose you think that you're capable of giving them to me?" sneering.

"Yes, I do think so and I am capable of it, and if you keep on talking like such a stupid fool, I'll be glad to give you more than those. But it will be out in the sun. Get out of here now and be quick about it!"

Strangely tall, strangely misshapen in the gloom, the three boys hurried up the old staircase to the yard. As the two combatants faced one another, Feodor saw his father approaching with Igor. "Saint Peter!" he ejaculated bitterly. "That old weasel saw us after all. He's told. Alexis is furious. Put your arm down, Martyn. Don't say a word, will you?"

The gypsy smiled obligingly. Here was a household where things happened. And who knew but what he would have the extreme pleasure of seeing a rat being beaten by a Baron? He hoped that the interesting thing in the gentleman's hand might be a whip of unusual qualities. And when the gentleman tired, he, Martyn, the Lizard's son, would offer to ply it, gratis, for five short moments in a fashion known only to himself.

Michael stepped forward, wetting his lips, but Alexis failed to notice him, placing his attention entirely on Feodor who stared somberly in return.

"Well?" A rasping pitch had come into his usually quiet voice. "What can you possibly say for yourself except that you cannot keep the word of a gentleman?"

Feodor glanced contemptuously at Igor who said dismally, "I saw you lead the boys down there, young Master. You never seem to realize what a dangerous—" Alexis cut in with, "Don't apologize to him, Igor. You only carried out my wish in the matter. Feodor, you gave me your word a short time ago that you would never do that again. What is the matter with you? Are you in all fact a liar?"

"It's the only interesting spot in the whole estate," sullenly.

"Perhaps. The fact remains that you cannot keep your word and it is time curative measures were applied."

Feodor eyed the punitive whip in dismay. He was actually going to be beaten like a dog or a peasant before that miserable gypsy. He looked at Michael who stepped nearer his father, and cleared his throat.

"I—it was my fault, sir. I—we were eating cherries and met Martyn. Rather we met him before that. He's the Lizard's son. She's not really a lizard. She's a gypsy queen and we ate cherries. I mean Martyn and we did, and I was thinking how we could entertain him"—Alexis' remote re-

gard had chilled his tongue—"so I suggested going down to the . . . dungeon . . . Feodor had nothing to do . . ."

"That is enough charitable lying for today. Go to your bed and stay there till tomorrow." Even if Alexis' paternal wrath had not been augmented by his observance of Martyn's involuntarily denying gesture, he would scarcely have believed his older son when he knew the younger one's depravities so well. To that one he said acidly, "You even permit your brother to lie for you. Feodor, what am I to think of you?"

"What you please, sir. Did I ask him to lie for me?"

"Your eyes asked that."

"Oh, well," flinging out his hands. "If he's such a fool that I can't even look at him without his assuming that he has to lie for me, how am I to help it? I don't care."

"That is exactly your trouble. You don't care about anything. We shall see how you care about a little discipline, however. I would suggest to your handsome young gypsy friend that he come to see you another day, when you may with an effort, of course, think of games less dangerous for all three of you."

His level look met Martyn's understanding. Between them passed a silent shaft of mutual esteem. The gypsy bowed easily to each one of them and turning, he ran fleetly back to camp. Only once did he twist his neck and the picture of a whip rising and falling in smooth strokes on the hide of one who assuredly deserved it lent conscious glee to his voice:

> **"Oh, the Devil He sat on an old dung heap,**
> **And he wept, 'This is just what we Devils reap,**
> **The last of man and the last of sheep;**
> **It's a stupid end for a poor Devil's keep!'"**

sang Martyn five times as the sun shone and the stony paths grew soft beneath his flying feet.

II

The next year Alexis' sister came to visit him for a time. She toppled to his arms from her carriage, covering him with endearments and her coachman with calumny.

"I am dead with weariness," Augustina wailed. "Never in my life have I seen worse roads. Will they never be improved? Give me tea as you love me, and quarts of it. And cakes. Does Appa still make almond cakes? How are you, dear brother? And why aren't my nephews here to meet me? Here I come a thousand versts to see them and do they meet me, even? No. My feelings are hurt. They write me regularly that they love me and when am I coming to see them?—at least Michael writes like that—and when I arrive, they have forgotten me. What a thing it is to be an aunt! Alexis, what can you give me to rub on my feet? I tell you they have been asleep for seven hours; full of needles they are. Oh! Don't let me walk or I shall die!"

"A mustard bath," he said calmly, settling the matter, "and I shall bathe your poor little fat feet myself. Why do you struggle? I thought you wanted to be carried to your rooms?"

Augustina subsided, moaning, kissing his ears and the top of his head whenever she happened to think of it and could reach them. "Six years," she sniffed. "Six whole years and never see my biggest brother. Then I meet him and he must carry my hulk because my feet have fallen asleep!" giggling. "Are you very glad to see me?" she demanded, getting a firmer hold of him as he took the first step up the stairs. "Do I weigh too much? Shall I get down?"

When he had set her across her own threshold, he embraced her warmly, remarking, "It would take more energy at any time to answer all your questions than to carry you to my roof, but naturally that would never occur to you. Must I always be reminding you that of all our family you were the only one born without a particle of brain? I shall bring up more water for you myself. Can Appa be of use to you now?"

"No. Yes, do send Appa to me. No, you won't bathe my feet. I won't have that; I'm not so enfeebled that a man must bathe my feet. And not too much mustard," she called after him, "as you know the stuff makes my eyes water!"

When Feodor entered the library, he found his father and brother sitting in company attitudes, Michael's glance wandering over the assembled glasses and pitchers and linen napkins.

"How considerate of you to wait for me!" guilelessly, "I am nearly famished."

"We were waiting for Augustina, of course," Alexis reproved.

"Oh, of course, sir. I'd nearly forgotten for the moment. And how is our dear Aunt Augustina?"

Alexis laid his book aside. "She is a kind woman and doesn't deserve the slightest sarcasm in your reference."

"Forgive me. I meant it in all lightness. How are all her diseases, then? I am not sarcastic now, sir; you *know* she has always cherished her diseases."

His father smiled indulgently. "I believe their number remains the same. Important but quite conservative. That is Augustina."

"Michael, I'll wager you that one almond cake on the tray that she will at the proper moment confide in us a new and extraordinary germ. At the slightest indiscretion on her part, it will become the death of her."

"You can have the cake if you want to wager on anything so sure," Michael told him. "It's nearly seven years since we've seen her and she may have changed. Has she changed at all?" appealing to Alexis who had gone to the door.

"Not very much. She is coming down now. Augustina," meeting her with a kiss, "your nephews have been wondering how much you may have changed. Tell them."

She kissed each of them soundly instead. To Feodor she gave an added caress, saying, "Dear God, but I'm afraid, actually afraid that you are going to be too handsome. But if you ride the way Appa says you do, you will probably fall one of these days and make your nose crooked, and that will even things up a bit. I have always distrusted men with too many good looks. And who mentioned a word of my changing?" she inquired, seating herself but getting up again very quickly and turning around for their inspection. "What do you think of this gown, Alexis? In my old age I have decided to wrap myself once into every new material. They say that the hours before death are very long, so I shall spend mine imagining the texture of the silks I have worn."

"Yours have been always in most excellent taste."

Her cheeks puffed out and up with contentment. "You have always been a most satisfactory brother," giving him his glass of tea, "and no doubt, a husband as good as that. I have decided that in any relationship of over forty years, good manners and an occasional pleasant untruth are worth considerably more than truth and any amount of money. Feodor, isn't this too weak for you? You always liked your tea quite strong, didn't you? Which of these two plates of things do you fancy?"

"Weak, Madame. And you have taken the only cake for

which I had a scurrilous craving." He grinned at her drooping lip.

"Oh, my dear boy," dismayed, "call Appa immediately and tell her to bring in others."

"You must not trouble yourself like that," he said politely. "Appa was so excited about your coming that she couldn't think of making more almond cakes. It was the last one in the house. She told me so herself, thereby making sure that I'd use all my wits to get it. But you are too clever for me. Go on. Do finish it. I can't think of anyone else who would enjoy it any more." He smiled amiably.

Augustina regained her composure. "Oh, well, what use is it to be a guest if one doesn't get the very best there is? Alexis, sit by me here and tell me what time has done to you. I may give you some of my excellent advice."

While they talked and reminisced, giving each other pleasant bits of gossip, her nephews drew away a little, where they could watch their estimable aunt giving some of her truly excellent advice. Every moment that she spoke her hands played about, stroking a cheek, tucking a wisp of hair fondly into the front of her pompadour, rubbing two little furrows between her eyes, patting the rounded bosom that Feodor maintained she had copied from the grandmother of all pouter pigeons, dabbing at the ingratiating button of a nose that so much of the time appeared to be quite lost between the upper factions of her jowls. Just as the observer became alarmed at the prospect of an entirely noseless princess, Augustina dabbed successfully and plucked it into view again. Even after more than forty years Alexis found her entertaining.

"You know," whispered Feodor to his brother, "the amusing antique really fancies herself in that taffeta. You look at her one minute and you think she's an ox, and then you

think, 'No, she's a lady chimpanzee.' Did you ever in your life see a person with so much conceit and no nose to smell it with?"

Despite his affection for his aunt, Michael snickered. She looked sharply at them, asking suspiciously, "What was that you said, Michael?"

"I didn't say anything. Tell her what it was you said, Feodor."

"I was only telling him that it made me furious not to see you wearing green satin again. You wore it the last time you were here and made a great impression on my youthful mind. Green makes you look quite regal, so naturally I can't understand your present passion for black." Feodor smiled engagingly at her, and helped himself to some buttered bread.

Her nose was lost again in fond reply. "I'm getting old, dear boy, and green satin has an astounding way of pointing out sins of the body." To his protesting snort she smoothed her not unattractive jowls. "Life is like that: one year a woman wears green satin and has a delightful nephew believing her regal, and apparently in the very next she finds herself waddling about in black taffetas, with the address of a good undertaker in her dressing-commode. Ah, well." She sighed vastly, and reached for another of the tea cakes.

Her nephews dangled long legs, ate solemnly, stirring their tea countless times for something to do, and counted the ruffles on their aunt's fashionable skirt, bodice and sleeves.

"More ruffles," Michael thought, "than a peacock has tail feathers."

"More flounces," Feodor believed, "than she could count in a year even if she put her mind to it."

Augustina smoothed the silks covering her knees, and

flinched as she touched her side, allowing a small groan to escape. When her brother asked if she were ill, she answered with commendable fortitude, "My dear Alexis, you know my health has never been of the best. Even I sometimes wonder that I get about as well as I do." Feodor winked at Michael who crossed his eyes over a lump of sugar. "My doctor says there is nothing for it."

Alexis raised concerned eyebrows. "Really? What is it?" he asked reasonably, refraining from adding "now." She leaned impressively toward him, whispered the dread illness and sat back triumphantly for its effect. At his gratifying alarm she continued, "I may go any time. Just like that," snapping her fingers.

"Like what?" Michael wanted to know. "You know it isn't polite to whisper. You told us so when we first started to talk."

"Yes," Feodor corroborated, "do tell us so that we can look more worried than Alexis."

Her face grew long with an effort. "I have a growth. It seems that I have had it for years and—"

"Why don't you have it out?"

"And it may kill me to have it out. At any rate, I will have no operations."

"I hardly blame you," Michael said gently. "It's much more amusing to have a growth instead. Is it small or large and does it spread like a plant?"

"Alexis, they make fun of me! Send them out of the—no, don't send them out of the room; they're too big. I can take care of those two! Michael, for all your gentleness, you are an imp of Satan and Feodor was born one. I'll have nothing more to do with either of you. I won't leave you any part of my estates."

As she took the last cake, brandishing it before them, Feodor spoke tenderly. "But don't you have to be careful

of the things you eat, dearest aunt? I should think so. One cake is a vicious prod to a growth, but two dozen!"

"When have I ever eaten two dozen cakes?" outraged. "A dozen perhaps, but never two. Am I a barrel? And what have cakes in any number to do with a growth? You eat and you have it, and you don't eat and still have it. A growth," she pointed out logically, "is a growth. I refuse to talk any more about it. Alexis, it seems to me that you need a woman about the house, someone to give these boys of yours some idea of how to speak to their elders."

"Appa is too forbearing, I know." He smiled affectionately at them. "Igor does his best but maintains that boys are anathema to old age the world over. He has a conviction that Feodor has six horns to every one of Michael's. I see small difference between them."

"The trouble with both of them," she snapped, "is their devilish amiability. They say perfectly poisonous things in such nice voices that one can barely sense the sarcasm for enjoyment of their speech. Feodor is worse, if anything. Something should be done about it. They should have had a sister," she said brightly. "A sister would have done them a great amount of good. The only thing one can expect of them now is daughters. But they won't have daughters, either one of them. Sons have a way of being born in our family."

"I think a daughter would be great fun. I'll have one," Michael promised, "if you don't think I will have become such a wretch by that time that even a daughter won't be able to save me."

"If you do," Alexis said, amused, "I hope she will have your own mother's blessed understanding."

"Sons," Augustina said firmly, stirring her tea and scalding her tongue on a spoon. "Michael will have three sons to your two and Feodor will have a dozen. I know all about

that kind of tendency in families. That reminds me—did you know that Dmitri is going to start on his military training immediately? I shall miss him. He has been such a good companion for my rides."

"That fool?" Feodor laughed disparagingly. "I thought he was still in the nursery!"

"You are inexcusably rude. He is your own cousin! Alexis, when are you really intending to send these boys to school? To Saint Petersburg, of course?"

"Yes, but not for another year or so. There is so much for them here to learn still. Michael seems more apt with books while Feodor gets on very well with the horses, although he manages to be quite glib about books by giving a certain sort of glance into their pages! Nearly clever, both of them."

"Well, when you do, we shall look after them now and then, though my dear Leff cannot do any more now than when you saw him. His right arm is useless altogether, but he is such a pleasant darling when I get lonely. When we received your letter, he said, 'Now Augustina, go and see your best-beloved brother for a while and get as firm a hold on his affairs and on your sense of humor as you can. Think how much more difficult things would be if your fortune were mine—you would be as nice to get along with as Saul.' . . . Was Saul morbid, Alexis? I have forgotten."

"I believe he was given to depressions. You are most kind, and when we get around to their formal schooling, I shall be relieved to talk it over with Leff. His ideas, for sound ones, are generally more happily put than most. Who's attending him now?"

"Oh, two or three doctors when he thinks it time to call one and then he calls all two or three at once. It would be funny if he were not so ill. He listens to them solemnly and then declares that the trouble is all in his ears and

will they please cut off his ears to relieve him? That's his way of showing that he doesn't believe a word of theirs. Of course, every now and then one of them gets very much put out and never returns, sending him a huge bill, instead, which Leff frames and sets on his commode. He tells everyone who comes to see him that it is things like that that should really be valuable as antiques a hundred years from now. And he hates his nurse."

"She's hideous," Feodor guessed.

"Naturally. That's why he hates her," chuckling. "But he is the only husband I shall ever want and I must cherish him. He writes the most derogatory rhymes in the world about her features and virtues, and you would think she'd leave the house, screaming with rage, but she doesn't. I think she thinks they're really funny. I hope so. She is the most capable creature, the only one I ever employed who could make him drink his barley water."

"I lived on that for days once when I was sick." Michael shuddered. "All any person in this house has to do is to stub his toe and Alexis fills him with barley water for a month. I do hope Uncle Leff gets well soon. I find it difficult to imagine his not being active any longer. He was always like a pleasant roll of thunder in the house."

Alexis took his sister's arm and walked with her into the yards fragrant with new fruit. Left to their own company, Michael and Feodor told each other's fortunes from the deserted tea glasses, a fortune that invariably told the same: Michael was going to make an excellent doctor in Alexis' place and Feodor was going to own the finest Arabs in Russia. "In the world," he would amend. "Michael, I'm going to own the most beautiful blooded creatures you ever heard of. Wait and see!" So his brother admitted the possibility and then for no reason at all they carried the trays of things out to Appa who was overcome by their thought-

fulness and said so, watching their retreat with a jaundiced eye. Their quarrels and their troubles she could bear, but their united kindness ruined her day with suspicion. They probably intended to steal her fresh steamed breads; she hid them forthwith. But if Feodor manœuvered the theft, Michael in all probability would return most of her cooking, so she brought them out again to cool. Those boys would be the death of her; that much in life was certain. She burned her arm on a sizzling pan and cried aloud for her twin. While he patted unsalted butter onto the welt, she told him and heaven that it was impossible for her to think even of those two without coming to positive grief.

Igor was no less morose. "Women were born to suffer," he reproved her, but gently, "so see to it that you do your suffering with a more womanly grace."

III

Igor and Appa always appeared to be putting Feodor to flight. As far as he was concerned they were eagle-eyed, never failing to note his pursuit of the daughters of the peasants working Alexis' fields, tripping them, shrieking in delight at their bright disordered clothing.

"For blood brothers," Augustina remarked disgustedly after one such incident, "I have never in my life seen two with such different ideas. I have decided that it is only when Michael is with him that they act alike."

The observation was not altogether spontaneous. Just that morning she had spent an hour in her brother's library where in a dusty corner she found a set of shelves reserved for Michael, their contents catalogued by perfectly printed cards above them. Her scandalized vision took in the volumes pertaining to Spinoza and Kant, Voltaire and Rabelais, the poems of a jester on the virtures of an early czar's two mistresses and twenty amiable acquaintances. Well, that was exactly what could be expected of a house managed by a shrieking shrew of a servant, and what made it worse was the fact that Alexis looked at the terrible creature with as much fondness as if she were really part of his family, like herself for instance. But that was ridiculous; she was imagining a situation that could not possibly exist. Alexis was like her; he would preserve his love and loyalties for those of his own blood. And here were yet more of these dreadful books! She sat down with one of them.

Despite Augustina's outward consideration of her, Appa

knew she was held in disapproval and could think of nothing more vicious to confide to Igor than, "Whenever Princess Augustina goes to do anything, she bounces. Don't you see yourself that she bounces?" It angered her that he felt an obligation to uphold the peculiarities of his master's sister by saying, "So do you." She retorted spiritedly, "That may be, but my bouncings are all to a purpose, and well you know it. And that's more than I can say for anyone else in this house!"

As she read on, Augustina became more alarmed. What in the world was Alexis thinking of? Did he suppose that books like these could do an imaginative enough boy any good? She would tell him a thing or two and in no uncertain terms. "History of the Jews." Well-thumbed, those copies. Humph. If Michael studied the history of the Christians as well, it might be of some benefit to him. Or did he think he knew all there was to know about Christians? Only last week Michael had said something to the effect that beauty rose to its finest expression only out of suffering and that he looked to the Jews for continued enrichment of the world's living. Just as if no one else suffered; just as if Russia didn't have too many Jews for her own good. She wished she had thought at the time of a clever way of routing him. However, speaking of things like that to him would be just so much time wasted. He would forget all such stuff in time, in a few more years when he would wear a growth of silky beard like all young Russians of good repute to mark the passing of his silly adolescence. He would be all agog about another set of ideas. Women or horses, as Leff would say. Still, Michael was not Feodor. He would always love his books.

Alexis failed to be embarrassed by her method of approach. "The Jester's Poems?" he asked. "Yes, I do remember those. I remember too that I was rather pleased at

Michael's immediately catching the delicious satire in them. He has a catholicity in his tastes that I admire. On the other hand, Feodor can't be bothered with a book if there's a horse to ride or a girl to plague. I did manage to get a promise out of him once that when I finally send him to the Gymnasium he will do all that is expected of him. He knows now that that is a place that doesn't tolerate boys' failing to meet requirements."

"Leff says it's a great place for a young man who thinks he has to sow wild oats. He sows a few and the monitors hound him until he's worn out or behaves himself. It's a wearing process, but an admirable one, apparently. Leff says he had an idea he was a god until he went there and learned there were no gods beside the monitors. Feodor is a little like Leff in his youth. How do you think he will take any discipline?"

"Men in the making take discipline as a matter of course. My sons are no longer children. I realize perfectly that there is little for them to do here. Feodor will be less the fool in a city, where in public at least, a boy must appear the man or not at all. He hates to be laughed at above all things."

But Feodor enjoyed laughter at another's expense. At the moment his cropped head was thrown back in merriment at the sight of his brother sprawling on the sod. He cajoled his prancing Arab nearer Michael who continued to lie quietly, prone on his back now, looking at the sun.

"Old Appa never turned a better pancake than the way Gray Thunder threw you. Did she? Shaken up, are you?"

Michael still stared and when Feodor, worried at last, dismounted to help him, he said briefly, "No. Get Alexis. Don't get hysterical, either—to him. I want—rest a bit."

Alexis came, running, the rest of them at his heels.

Despite Michael's inevitable moaning he took him into his great arms, and carried him swiftly to his bed.

Augustina bore the changed atmosphere of her brother's house for another month when it became too depressing, and as Leff's latest letters were indicating that he missed her more than he had allowed her to suspect before, she begged Alexis' understanding of her situation and packed her belongings. There seemed nothing she could do, really, she explained carefully, with Michael in his bed like that, unable to do a thing but look up where the sun might be were not a wooden ceiling there instead.

Spine strapped carefully, face attempting to hide every torturing thought, Michael stayed in his bed like that for the greater part of a year. Feodor consoled himself for the loss of his brother's companionship by riding Gray Thunder, breaking him to rein with the same thoroughness that had succeeded in taming his own favorite, Old Rust. Alexis came to the silent figure many times a day and often in the night to hold one or both of the thin hands warmingly against his huge breast while he told lightly of all the things that went on about the house and all the farms, finding in this deepening of their allegiance a lessening regret for the day that had brought it about. Appa stewed body and hands over her stoves in heroic effort to tempt the patient's appetite, wept into her rejected soups and clabbered milks, wept into them again when he began accepting them and gained in health.

His gain became most noticeable after a half year when Alexis began talking with apparent innocence of the splendid courses of study offered by a Gymnasium in Saint Petersburg where some of his old comrades were professors through choice. While Michael picked at the drumstick of a roasted fowl, Alexis would have become most excited about

something said. Did he really mean that seriously about medicine? Well now, that was a splendid thing for a young fellow to want. There was so much to do on their own estates, with everyone becoming ill at one time or another. If he himself had had any sense equal to his son's, he would have applied himself more as a young man, but perhaps Michael would make up in time for his own defection. That, of course, was a misrepresentation that his son did not believe; no one knew better than himself that Alexis made few mistakes over the ailings of a human body. Before he realized it, Michael would see that he had in some fashion done away with the food before him, taken his soup and pudding without one shiver of distaste, and Alexis would cease his fevered conversation long enough to chuckle.

Every day after that when he came into the sick-room, his eyes seemed to glitter with some fine new thing that he had just thought of in connection with his beloved son's impending career. As Michael grew stronger and could sit up for a little while, charts and maps of the human being's anatomy were spread across his counterpane and Alexis would explain among other things how it was that Michael's back was hurt and why it took such a confoundedly long time to right itself, proving, too, that it was almost an act of God that the thing chose to right itself at all. Now that Michael was nearly well his father could tell him how nearly lost he had been. As their talks grew longer the boy's natural love was augmented by a fierce admiration that this man had wanted to put away all wealth, all leisure, for a time to learn these wonderful things for the benefit of other men. Once a sense of possession thrilled him, made him take his father's hands and hold them close to his cheek. They looked at one another in fine content.

Sometimes Alexis appeared about to burst with the store of his confidences, a favorite one being, "Now we won't tell

Feodor a thing about it until you are rid of your bed for good and then we will show him your packed cases and tell him that you are going to a famous Gymnasium and be a doctor. And when he has his usual spasm at not being let in on a thing, we'll tell him that he may go at the same time. If we tell him now, he will do nothing but sit on your feet and keep you wrought up about one thing or another; that would be bad for you. Now wouldn't it?" solemnly.

Michael would assume equal solemnity and both thrived on their plans. After a long stretch of months Alexis' wounded son was able to stand on the strength of Appa's holy-watered meals. The holy water she begged from a priest and sprinkled it carefully on every dish that left her kitchen for Michael, and took his cure entirely to herself. Igor had a conviction of his own on the matter—hadn't he been burning a certain number of candles to the blessed saints for a certain number of days each month? He felt it unnecessary to tell her that as an experiment he had but last month decided to burn only half as many candles and double the number of his prayers. Much less expense and trouble it was, and the effect, praise God, was the one religiously expected in the beginning.

IV

The ten or eleven months that Alexis spoke of so glibly during Michael's illness stretched to three years before he could bear parting with his sons, sending them to the distant Saint Petersburg. At last the difficult thing had been accomplished. He had kissed them on both cheeks, hugged them to his heart and bade them go with God. Now Feodor tilted back in a chair. His nose wrinkled in aversion.

"So this is a student's room! How long are you going to be able to bear it, do you think? Of all the dank little holes!"

Michael scratched his head. "Miserable, I admit. Apparently you educate your mind to one thing and your body to another. I've tried that bed; it's something not to be talked of without emotion. The washbowl's cracked; the pitcher has no nose; that mirror makes me look like a child of Satan by an imbecile. If we want other comforts, I understand there is nothing to prevent our buying them. Oh, well, I suppose that in two or three years we will find ourselves foolishly fond of the whole business. Alexis still talks of a horsehair atrocity he found in his room and sold years later. He almost weaps now when he thinks of the eight or nine kopecks he got for auctioning the thing away."

Feodor smiled wryly. "He does get sentimental. I assure you that I don't intend living in this building. If all the rooms are as small as this, I won't ever be able to call you a fool out loud without having the whole place think we're at each other's throats. I'm going to rent something some-

where and even if the thing is a hole, no one is going to know what I'm doing every moment."

Michael stood up, stretched long arms over his head, thinking that the shabby student room for all of its bleak walls and splintery floor had an air about it, something like that of an old coat that had once been fashioned of fine blood-warming materials. The material of this room was made of the past eagerness of the youth using it, youth hungry and thirsty for knowledge, sometimes desperate, even hating it sometimes. It had an indefinable character that a hundred years of existence and the touch of varying personalities could produce like a patina on an inherently precious article. Michael loved his old blouses, his frayed cloaks. He loved this room on sight and closer acquaintance. It was his.

Appa's quilts with the colored blocks running crazily up and down on the good sides would give hominess to the horrible little bed. By saving his allowance carefully he could even buy a good one later. An amusing portrait of Alexis painted on ivory when he was a stripling greatly determined on chin whiskers would give another nice touch; that could go over his table by the kerosene lamp where he could see it every night. It was comforting to think he could tell this younger Alexis every single night how the studies were affecting his mind.

Of course, the roaches running carelessly in and around the wash-stand were nothing to take to one's affections, but they might be far worse; were this a warmer land they might be scorpions and nip one fatally. Moreover, large and substantial as the creatures were, they couldn't really keep one from studying. Michael found himself wishing that he possessed Feodor's imperturbable spirit so that, if one day some professor caught him unawares, he could say brightly, "Unprepared, sir. It was the roaches, sir. They hid my

books." Either that would make the professor one's friend forever or bring about a thorough castigation. Only people like Feodor had luck in such matters.

That disconcerted young man was saying, "So this is one of the places that our dear sweet cousin Dmitri thought 'so interesting.' I'll wager he never even put his foot in this building once. Either that or Uncle Leff put him up to telling us what a great place this was. I hope Dmitri soon falls over that stick he carries and breaks his silly neck. How long will you bear it, I say?"

"His neck?"

"Of all the dreary little holes, this is the dreariest," ignoring him. "One needs a drink here before imbibing higher education; I can see that."

"The stove!" Michael exclaimed delightedly. "Feodor, will you look at that bombastic little stove? I just saw it. Do you suppose that it will heat more than thirty inches of this room?"

"Throw it out," indifferently. "If you wait until the weather really gets cold, that thing will heat this room just enough to congest both your lungs and kill you. And that would be a tragedy if it happened before you've had time to find out at least one pernicious cure for some equally pernicious malady. Now, listen to me a moment—you're smiling as though you thought everything about this room were the product of your own talent, God forbid!"

"I'm listening and I'm fond of this room."

"Well, I've met up with a group of handsome chaps who singularly enough lack any feeling at all for the thicker books. We find that while we are all here to acquire a certain amount of learning befitting gentlemen, none of us entertains the thought of furrowed brows and spectacles, both of which we shall certainly adopt if we keep company too much with people like you. So we have organized our-

selves. We are the Festive Order of Asses. Michael, before you sits the Ass of Asses. Bow, you fool."

Michael bowed, murmuring meekly, "Your Highness."

"Imperial Ass, please and if you will. The other is good enough for the more common orders."

"That may please Uncle Leff but not Alexis. He was convinced when we left that you were going to look for a serious idea or two. He'll be disappointed that you couldn't find any."

"I am serious in placing a little novelty in what might be a poor dullard's life. One dullard to a family is enough. Well," stamping in his new boots, "you don't take this aristocratic ass to your bosom so he will go find a friendlier one. By the way, Appa, the old termagant, didn't pack a single towel in my cases. I know that she gave them all to you but I'll have my revenge. I won't wash. Imagine not seeing her until three or four years from now. She would say, 'Why, Master Feodor, how you have changed! What happened to you?' . . . And I would say, 'Dear me, yes. Didn't you hear? It's the towels. I've given them up entirely since you forgot to supply me.' . . . And Appa would have splendid hysterics."

Michael held open the door with sardonic courtesy. "Your title is well-deserved. You will never have to fear abdication in favor of a lesser Ass. Go on. God be with you. Good night."

V

The scholarly life was anything but one of delight as even Michael was to find, and Feodor, to his repugnance. The professors treated each one of the students like a man, giving him a man's share to learn, a man's examinations to test his mind. Stupidity, unwillingness, facetiousness poorly-timed, earned just criticisms which could be harsh on occasion, and frequently examples were made of unfortunate students; they were expelled after one warning sometimes, with small chance of reinstatement. If one were to return because his father happened to be a noble highly placed, who could exert pressure of a sort on the school authorities, his return was unheralded and usually he seemed nicer for the experience. It was not an extraordinary thing to find some recalcitrant individual being flogged for his sins. Professors were serious men with a great quantity of hard work before them; they had no time for constant verbal criticism of the young people in their care, and time had proved that floggings did considerably more good for a too belligerent spirit. For the most part students could live where they willed, but they were not to be seen on the streets after nine o'clock at night. Gymnasiums of lesser reputation might allow their students freedom of the city to a later hour but in this one they were to abide by the rules, and there were enough monitors to see that they did.

They were unhappy souls, some of those monitors. When they happened to be young men from poor or middle class families, powerful usually in physique, their very names seemed scurrilous to those of higher birth. Sometimes they served in their capacity for a small wage, sometimes for

nothing, depending on the professors' state of mind at the time of election and the prospective monitor's need. Infrequently, to balance the condition of affairs, a student would be chosen from the highest class and delicately requested to take that important post in the life of his school, it being tacitly understood that he was not expected in any manner to soil his person in the observation of his duties; should occasion arise for chastisement of a sort, the matter could be referred easily to another monitor more inclined to that sort of thing. While the system was not perfect, it was important, furnishing spasmodic excitement to the Gymnasium's dry bones of learning.

One among the students formed an especial attachment for Michael in the very beginning. Whatever his real name was, it was never remembered by his class-mates after Feodor named him the Musty Mouse. Appropriately, cruelly, that fitted him the way whiskers belonged to one of the actual breed. He was a small man disposed to nervous actions, scuttling rather than walking because he had so many things to do and not enough time in which to do them. Because he was poor his poverty made of him a gray thing. He was indeed a trodden musty little mouse and whatever inhumanities Feodor might fill his life with, none would be more base than the deliberate invention of that name. On Michael's lips it sounded differently, a gallant thing, because in his mind he thought its owner like a small banner, a true banner worn against the onslaught of illimitable gales. The Musty Mouse adored him for his open tenderness.

He had a way of knocking on Michael's door, often after midnight, and saying apologetically, "I hope you're not offended. I saw the light under your door and thought I'd see if you would like a glass or two of tea. I'll bring it into your room now, if you wish. It seems to be getting cold much earlier these days; don't you think so?"

Another person might have thought him cringing, a satellite bearing gifts, but Michael saw his genuine affection, his clear eagerness, and was touched.

"I can't think of anything that I would rather have. But I won't drink a drop unless we can have it together in your room. We can do the rest of our studying later. Can't I bring some of this wood into your own castle? I've too much. It's a real nuisance."

Michael would have to over-ride worried offers of payment and the two would then trudge over to the other's "castle," both of them bulging in all directions with kindling and bags of charcoal. Excited over his nice guest, the very first he had ever had, the Musty Mouse began to babble like a monkey over his tea and chipped old glasses. Wanting friendship to ride untrammeled out of that natural confusion Michael found himself babbling too, about nothing at all, and shortly they were absolute companions. He formed a habit hugely pleasing to his friend of appearing unannounced in any manner, head thrust inside the door, either to remark about the beastly cold and disappear or demand that the Musty Mouse put on his cape and go with him to sample the fare of a tiny restaurant with abominable tablecloths but most delicious roasts.

The Mouse felt very badly that he could not pay for his dear friend's dinner; he had all he could manage to pay for his own. His dear friend told him violently to go to the devil. Did he even think he was going to be allowed to pay for his own dinner? What was he, a born stupid or something? Didn't he go to a lot of labor every day to get tea for both of them and didn't he see that this was a logical way of settling debts of that sort? What, was he still chattering? For the love of their beautiful sainted mothers, when did he intend eating his good hot soup, pray?

Later they would go out to find that heaven had sent a

blizzard to justify the soup, and because the Musty Mouse's cape was thin, Michael would throw his own warm one down about him and the pair would move homeward, making a comfortable dark splotch upon the snow's expanse.

Once when Michael came down the corridor he looked for the light under his own door. There was none there although the lamp had been left burning on the table. Then the Musty Mouse never could have seen such a light as he had said on the first night when he appeared about the offering of tea. That had been a gentle little untruth, impelled by a necessity of the soul, and Michael loved him more for it.

He never asked about the Mouse's family or affairs, knowing that in good time he would be told all there was to be told, seeing in the meantime that the little man's clothes were becoming worn, green, and that there were too few of them. It was bound to be a long hard period of waiting until the day that the Musty Mouse would receive the teaching post for which he wished and worked unremittingly. Michael was just as eager for that attainment, knowing well that the Musty Mouse felt in his heart he would be truly safe only when he could peer at the world over his own desk.

Dinners and charcoal the Mouse accepted with honest gladness, going to devious lengths to merit them as if his friendship were not merit enough, but all of Michael's efforts to loan or give him money were met with alarmed refusals and a definite promise that if things really went badly with him, he would accept a loan immediately on the moment of need. Michael had to be content at that point but on those days when he suspected the Mouse of not having one kopeck to his frayed pockets, he would appear out of the night with tiny icicles forming on his clipped red moustache, declaring he was sick of stuffy little restaurants and had no business whatever these days before examinations to think of the things. Then he would drop an army

of packages on the Mouse's chest and more time and pleasure would be spent over those than on anything else they ever did.

There were round loaves of rye bread or the rarer long ones of Vienna wheat, butter, smoked herrings or pickled ones with onions, a cabbage salad or one of beets, hot sweet cakes. And an amazing quantity of tea that the Mouse made in an instant in a perfect frenzy of excitement. Often he would be overcome with feeling, unable to think of tea or anything at all, and Michael would have to poke his small stomach with a loaf or dangle a string of German sausages before his glassy gaze to bring him out of that pleasant apoplexy.

Finally the Mouse admitted that he had to have more ways of making money. Running errands for the professors and everybody was not particularly remunerative even though every single request were carried out. Michael thought of a good scheme for the winter time, and had no difficulty persuading his fellow students to it: in the dreadful cold mornings the room stoves did not seem to give out a decent amount of heat for several hours and what better could be done about it than have the Musty Mouse pop into the room at a little before daybreak and start the pugnacious things out of their banked state? Pay for that ungodly work had to be higher than that for errands and odd jobs, and the students in Michael's building were so eager for that kind of service that some of them paid the Mouse beforehand. Michael disliked having another do for him what he could do easily for himself but if having his stove taken care of meant that he could give his friend a little money, it made him happy.

The Musty Mouse never seemed to sleep and that worried Michael. The studies themselves took so much time to master that it was a wonder one could do anything else,

but the Mouse continued to stoke stoves, and scuttle from room to room and floor to floor. He still washed his own and other students' underwear, and solemnly ironed the long-legged, long-armed wool things with a squat old flatiron that for all its squatness weighed half as much as himself.

Several holidays when Michael wanted him for some frivolity, he was not to be found anywhere; then on his appearance it would be ascertained that he had been in the quarter of the city where so many of the storage houses were. What in the name of heaven was he lurking about in that forsaken section for, even if an idiot like Feodor had found a rental there to his liking? Had he been stealing wheat or imported dolls? No? Then had he been calling on Feodor? No? Then what was he, some sort of silly centipede that he could go galloping all over Saint Petersburg in one afternoon? A stop was certainly going to be put to that kind of business. Michael would drag his flustered quarry to his room and pour most of a quart of good beer down its gullet. After the beer the Musty Mouse would smirk, his tongue loosened, muttering something about rentals being remarkably cheap way over in that section and muttering something else again to the effect that one did not mind half-starving and all such stuff as that if there were one other to appreciate one's efforts. In spite of all of his conceit for their thoroughly cemented friendship Michael was not so obtuse as to take the complicated compliment to himself.

"A woman! I knew it!" he declared in pretended petulance. "Some flighty chit, she is for a fact, making you fly there to see her. Or she's fat and dumpy, without a particle of charm or soul even, to say nothing of her face. Isn't she, now?"

The victim would protest, hiccuping between giggles and another tin of beer that she was no such thing. She was a

cunning creature, a very pretzel of a girl that he was utterly taken with. She was . . . hiccup . . . *hic*cup. . . . He was asleep amid his hiccups, lying back relaxed, a momentarily domesticated mouse, one without an inhibition, a mouse that had had to walk a long way home.

Michael would enjoy him thus, adjust his slipping spectacles, then wrapping the thin cape about the thin shanks would take him to his bed, and lay him carefully between his frowzy quilts.

At least this was one inebriated mouse that would be returned with Christian forethought to his own safe little hole.

VI

Old Appa had never learned to write, but bake she could, willingly, and did, sending with Alexis' aid huge parcels of good things by post to their boys. She never tired of preparing jars of pickled fruits, sweet preserves, hard candies, cakes that in the journey became harder still but were nevertheless desirable. Feodor found himself with a defective tooth and nothing must do but that the nurse be told of it with the added information that she was ruining him, stomach and molars, and soul, too, if he so much as dared show the latter to her, and if she felt an irresistible impulse to send those awful little rock-cakes all the time, the least she could do was to post a pick-axe with them so a fellow could try to save his other teeth. Alexis read the infrequent diatribes to her and she spent many an absent-minded hour over her pots and kettles, trying to think of a satisfyingly vicious reply, ending up by not making reply of any sort and retaining his last box of presents she had gathered. Then in a few weeks she would have the colossal satisfaction of receiving an epistle from him that denoted his complete change of heart. Secretly she loved this quarreling at long distance; it proved Feodor was not wholly lost to her.

Alexis' sons saw their Aunt Augustina and Uncle Leff at least twice a month. Once when school was mentioned in their conversation, Leff remarked that man had all he could cope with to be educated by life and in allowing books to educate him further, he was certain of a miserable existence and had no one but himself to blame for it. What Leff believed and what he occasionally ranted about were

two different things, for he loved giving Michael a deal of good books for a present, and pictures of noted Cossacks to Feodor who, observing the beauty of their steeds, became depressed over his own state of affairs.

"Why anyone wants to spend a lot of money on dusty books when he can buy a glorious beast like one of those, I can't understand," he said confidentially.

"I know." Leff would nod cheerfully from his pillows. "Some men feel that way about women. Others like you think a horse's hoof is the key to the world. Now I feel that way about doctors. I should love to have a collection of doctors, a really notable collection, you know—not any of those near-sighted ones that no one's ever heard of. I have four at the present hour of reckoning, but that doesn't satisfy me. Four aren't nearly amusing enough. Nine or ten might be enough to whet my humor with."

After another hour of talk his lips would find smiling a greater difficulty and Michael would rise to go, his heart aching for brave Leff who fought alone in the midst of four, whose mouth was the bravest mouth imaginable. Augustina would hustle them out of the house after cooling his pillows, and pursue them a moment later with some other gift that Leff had thought of at the moment.

"You know," Feodor remarked when they were out of sight, "there isn't a dignified thing about that woman, yet she inspires a certain sort of respect. She almost never walks if she may run. She's fat and awkward. Of course she behaves properly enough, but how do you account for it?"

Michael thought. "Her eyes," he was sure. "It's never occurred to me before, but they are very light blue and cold as ice. Much lighter than Alexis'. And colder than ice when she's really angry. All the time that her body does undignified things her eyes tell you plainly that they know what it's all about, and you find yourself reacting to them. They're

frozen ponds and only Augustina knows what stirs under the ice. And it's funny the way she asks the advice of everyone she likes and never follows it unless she likes that, too!"

He thought further that the eyes in one family made a fascinating study. Those of Alexis were shrewd and sharp but clear and kind at the same time, a most wonderful blue under his black hair. His sister Augustina's were like frozen water. His brother, Dmitri's father, had nice ones but they were rather weak. Of his sons, Michael had dark blue and Feodor—truly brilliant his, hard as stones one moment and hot as fire the next, by far the handsomest eyes one might ever expect to see.

Dmitri's father felt an occasional blood-relative's twinge over his nephews' struggle with higher learning in the gloomy Gymnasium. He would send a sleigh for them in the winter time or one of his carriages in late spring; young men were an excellent addition to an early dinner or one of the parties he enjoyed giving; they reminded him of a keen aching youth he had lost somewhere. They might have been invited with a flattering regularity if Feodor had taken pains to disguise his opinion of Dmitri. That young fellow he thought a conceited fool, a more than quaint idiot, a stuffed popinjay, and told him so in politely repulsive phrasing. Once when they were very young he had even told him he would infinitely prefer a cuckoo for a cousin, and Dmitri found himself in an unparalleled quandary: as he was a guest in Feodor's house he could not fling himself on the rude pest, and as the rude pest was stronger it would have been in any event a sad debacle. At any rate for the ensuing fifteen years whenever his mother so much as smilingly mentioned his fascinating young cousin Feodor, Dmitri was immersed in a fit of sullen vapors.

Feodor, however, had much to amuse him. The shed he had leased, disreputable as it was, offered escape from

criticism. Most of his evenings he spent with student cronies reasonably near the school, but for those nights and holidays when he wanted unlimited carousing, the shed was to be had, far enough away so that monitors and professors might never hear of its existence. Had he chosen to exercise judgment in his company from time to time, he might have been always safe, but stories began to circulate freely about his allowance, his drinking, his strange ability to pass examinations while never ostensibly studying a book, the girls he brought in from the streets, his jaunts at midnight and later still about the city streets.

Michael was among the first to hear these things, and knew they must be nearly true. Remonstrances did little good; Feodor jeered when he didn't cheerfully acknowledge his sins, and became vituperative when it appeared that his brother knew his slightest escapade.

"What in the world is it you want me to do? You know I abominate this place! The city itself is well enough, though it is stifling me. But work I won't. If you or anyone else interferes with me, you will drive me to something really mad. I won't last all my terms anyway, so I may as well enjoy myself. You attend to your own business of living and I'll attend to mine."

"Don't you feel you owe Alexis anything? Your promise?"

Feodor returned an equally level, "No. We live our lives to get as much out of them as possible. How can Alexis, riding his farms, doctoring his peasants and friends, know what is good for me?"

"So drunkenness and street women are good for you."

"For me, yes. I find them amusing. But they wouldn't amuse you, so we won't discuss them further. I'm out of drawers. Lend me some of yours, will you? And try to find some that aren't so terribly scratchy. Positively, there's no

woman in the world that has a more sensitive skin than young Feodor."

Taking the bundle then that his brother wrapped up carefully, Feodor would bid him a jaunty farewell and disappear down the old corridor. Once after exactly such a loan, Michael would have sworn that the woolen drawers seen publicly adorning a general's statue in the park of a certain lady's estate were his own. When they were brought to her attention, the scandalized lady in question made an alarming to-do about them. They were a sin, a sacrilege, an abomination on the legs of the portly gentleman who was her ancestor, and she threw half the city into the confusion of hunting for the wicked.

While Appa's excellent patch on the general's right thigh was familiar enough, it never would have done, of course, to attempt identification of the scratchy things.

VII

At the end of the second year the Musty Mouse asked Michael's advice. This business of earning one's living and education too, was a huge problem.

"I shall have to ask to be selected as a monitor next term," he worried. "They probably won't take me anyway, but I must try to make a little more than I did this year. There really hasn't been a respectable seat to my breeches for oh!—so long, Michael. I suppose I could get along without books by borrowing most of yours but I really must have a seat, now mustn't I?" looking appealingly over his glasses, adding in tremulous fashion, "and I can read any of your books now through the seat of my breeches."

Michael said gravely that he considered a real seat a matter of utmost importance. One simply had to have a decent thickness of cloth between one's self and an interested world; that was all. And what earthly comfort were books compared to breeches? He declared admiringly that there seemed to be an unusual syllogism somewhere in this argument but he was too doltish at this late hour to track it into the open.

"By all means," he encouraged him, and pointed out, "it isn't anyone at all who can be chosen monitor, you know. I think I'll put my name up for the privilege too, so that I can be with you some of the time and not lose you altogether."

Tears threatened to drown the Musty Mouse but he survived the deluge of understanding. "Then you don't think they'll despise me, do you, for wanting to do it? The other students, I mean? I wouldn't think of interfering with anyone unless he was really mean."

The picture of his interfering with someone actually mean disrupted Michael's peace of mind. Why, the little fellow would be killed in any kind of a fight. "You refer the mean ones to me or some professor, do you hear? Promise me you will tell me everything that bothers you and I'll honestly tell you if I think it's worth bothering about. Do you promise?"

The promise was made in nervous relief, the Mouse scuttling to his room for saccharine and a commemorative brew of tea, hoping wistfully it wasn't really sacrilege to feel after talking with Michael that it had been a bit more satisfactory than a harassed little prayer to God. Sometimes He seemed such a long way off for an immediate problem.

In the third year Feodor threw discretion entirely to the winds. Regardless of how much the Musty Mouse might close his eyes he could not help but be constantly worried by the sins that Michael's brother flaunted in his face whenever he found opportunity.

"So! So you're a monitor now! Fellows, what do you think of this ferocious little policeman? Isn't he just the one to remind you of your duty to home and wife? Musty, you wouldn't think for a minute of telling on me, would you, being my brother's little sycophant? Did you know that I have no intention of involving myself in any mathematics today? Instead I am going to get terribly, terribly drunk. Now what do you think of that? Are you going to tell another monitor or are *you* going to make me go? . . . Look, friends, I think he's going to cry!"

The Mouse took this new trouble to his idol. "What would you do if you were in my place, Michael?" he began carefully. "There's a fellow comes of a nice family and all that and I don't think for a minute that he's as mean as he has a reputation for being—" pausing glassy-eyed. "I mean I

know he isn't anything like what he pretends to be. I'm getting paid, you know, and that makes it very difficult for me. I don't quite know what to do about it."

Michael rummaged about on his table, knowing perfectly who was the source of trouble. "I wouldn't ask anyone at all about it," he said briskly, cleaning his pen. "Report him to his professors. They'll attend to him in short order." Then fixing the Mouse with a clear regard, "If I were a monitor and I'll be one some day soon, I think, my own brother wouldn't stand in the way of my duty, particularly when I had asked him first to behave himself. That's all that can be expected of anyone."

That was a loophole to worry him further; asking Feodor to behave himself would be like throwing his own small body into the path of a thunderbolt. But the thing would have to be done.

Feodor thought his mildly stated request a great joke, and pretending to be deeply touched, he reached down from his imposing height to pat the object of the school's law.

"Dear little Musty! Thank you for hurting my feelings as little as you do. I wouldn't make your life miserable for the world. Of course, I wouldn't. Now run home and sew the buttons on your breeches."

Confused, the Mouse went home. He had not been able to gain a single point. In a state of bitterness ferocious for him, he sewed on his missing buttons and reflected that in a whole world full of men Feodor happened to be the only one who saw that his breeches needed mending.

The matter could not end there because of the very nature of those involved. The Musty Mouse wore himself out pondering the ethics of his position and then placed his information before the authorities. Those estimable men waited not at all and ordered Feodor flogged. He was made to take off his smartly-belted coat, his blouse, his undershirt,

and submit to twelve lashings. When a similar punishment was meted out to him within two months, he appeared to watch his ways for a time because any further indiscretion meant that he would be expelled. That second public disgrace was a torch to his inflamed nature. More than ever he went to his unpleasant quarters far from the school. Usually he would go alone, then return very drunk and morose or given to loud boasting and pointless humor.

"I'll kill that fool Musty, if it's the last thing I do," was the least of his threats.

"Your ravings make me tired," Michael told him more than once. "Every time you have come in here lately, I know exactly what you are going to say. Now get out. I'd rather read the dullest books in the world than listen to you. Go on."

"I want to borrow some money."

"You mean you want me to make you a present of it. No, sir. Go and get it from some of those bosom friends of yours."

"My credit," said Feodor in mock surprise, "seems to have gone to pieces. I think it's due to the weather. Now give me three rubles, my sweet, or I shall steal them. Do you want your brother to be a thief?"

Michael leered pleasantly in answer and removed his rubles from the table drawer. When they were safe in his pocket, he said mildly, "Now let's see you borrow them."

"You're a mean old woman. I'll be forced to write to Alexis."

"Don't. He has his suspicions of you. Seriously now, you know what it will do to him, if he hears of the scrapes you get into. He's getting old."

"It's a good thing for me. Old or not, he will have the surprise of his life if he tries to beat me again. I'm a lot taller now than he is."

Michael realized that his casual appeal to Feodor's filial affection and duty had utterly missed its purpose. Mention of their deep-souled father only brought to Feodor's mind conceit for his own splendid strength. The arrogant knave sat there, flexing his arms and knees, pleasurably arching his back. He *was* a glorious boy to look at. Michael felt a sudden sickness. It was a momentarily unbearable thing of great affection and a greater misery. He made a cigarette very carefully, his fingers showing whiter than the delicate strip of paper enwrapping his tobacco. Feodor was his blood brother yet he could not wholly understand him, try as he would. Their relation to Alexis and one another failed to give them common ground to meet on. Arguing with this Feodor was like arguing with a fiend. All the time that one talked the fiend would assume striking poses so that one began to gibber while admiring him. If only one could seize him by the scruff of the neck and shut him up in a dark closet until reason could be evoked. Still, no closet would be strong enough to hold Feodor and if it were, he would burst into some obscene song and that would make things worse than ever. Long ago that gypsy boy—whatever his name was—sang something when he left them the first day of their acquaintance. Well, whatever it was, it had seemed telling, that song, making Feodor nearly uncontrollable. They had had a fight about it afterward, he and the good-looking gypsy. That was one time that Feodor's strength hadn't been so superior.

"You look like a priest who's just heard a series of bowel-moving confessions," Feodor told him petulantly. "Well, what is the penance, Father Michael? Or are you out of penances today?"

"One promise. But you won't keep it so I won't exact it. You haven't even that much strength of character."

"Hm. One promise about a hundred feet long, I pre-

sume? I must promise to let the Musty Mouse alone, and never drink a drop of anything but water, and speak to no women who would love to speak to me, and I must write Alexis regularly even though Appa forgets to give him the letters for weeks, and I must go to bed at nine o'clock if not at half after seven, and learn all of my stupid courses without a hitch. Well," standing up, furious, "you can go to the lowest depth of hell! Hear me?"

"Perfectly. All of Saint Petersburg must have heard you! Can't you ever talk like a reasonable human being? Do you always have to bellow like an ill-bred ox?" Michael himself was bellowing and feeling better for it. Vituperation returned in kind had a faculty of giving one a sense of health and power. He bellowed once more, hurling his cigarette to the floor. "You can go to the lowest depth of hell yourself and stay there! Now get out of my room and stay out! I don't want to hear any more about your filthy troubles, understand? When they're not of your own making, I'll be glad to help you and not before. Alexis' old whip is too damnably sweet for your hide, and I promise you that if you ever lay a finger on Musty Mouse, I'll kill you for it!"

To his own admiration he found that he had pushed the appalled Feodor out of the room and locked the door on his vitriolic promises.

"Yes," he replied at the bolt, "I did come here to study, and I am a rotten bookworm and all the things you say I am, but I happen to have a little sense and can use it. Now go back to the Asses' pen you broke out of and see how much good the other occupants will do you when you get into real trouble!"

Feodor ceased thrusting his shoulders against the panel of the door, and chuckled as if at a diverting thought.

"You know, you wretched bookmark," he demanded,

"that if I hadn't been off guard, you never would have managed to close that door on me?"

Michael smiled on the side of victory. "Yes, I know. Does that make you feel any better, you conceited gander?"

"Oh, considerably. Listen, my sweet, as Uncle Leff would say, did I leave my tobacco in there? Will you stick it out the door to me? I'll promise not to disturb your learning further."

"Yes, you did, and I won't stick it out the door to you, my sweet. It's barely enough payment for the nervous indigestion you give me. It's much nicer tobacco than any I've been buying and you've never seen fit to tell me where you buy yours, so I'll keep it with your compliments, I know. It's one of the few things you buy with Alexis' fortune that isn't in execrable taste. Thanks for the gift. Till we meet again, then."

"What a bilious villain," Feodor sadly informed the bolt that seemed to withstand successfully his determined onslaught. "I don't mind his shredding my character but my tobacco is something else again. Well, all right. Till we meet again, then. And I hope there's an evil genie in the smoke and you choke to death!"

For the last time he flung himself against the sturdy door, and then rushed headlong down the hallway like a destructive meteor, meeting finally with two of the Asses whose ready tongues never failed to soothe his turbulences. The three bowed extravagantly in all directions, kissed each other's cheeks with mock affection, the tips of one another's noses as a mark of more fathomless regard, and arm in arm they went out to keep company with the night.

Far beneath his window Michael heard the last of their united braying, a vulgar fragment of what was undoubtedly a very bawdy ballad.

BOOK TWO

THE LIZARD'S SON

VIII

Two gypsy vandals rode out of the town of Taganrog. They had rings and rubles in their pockets for reasons known only to themselves and their attitude was one of complacence.

"I find that I am always glad to leave the cities behind me," said the one known as Martyn, the Lizard's son.

"And the sheriffs," added his companion, a man called Black Brow for want of his true Christian name and because of a certain iniquitous cast to the hairy arch above his eyes. And then the two shook with guileless mirth.

When they had ridden a little further into the country, they permitted their horses a slow gait and Black Brow scanned the fields at the right side of the road.

"There's a woman crying under that huge tree," he observed, but not very sadly. "It's too bad. It's such a nice afternoon."

"It is a nice afternoon but her crying can't be very important when she's sitting up. Now if she were lying down and crying, it would be safe to wager that it was for a sad business."

"A woman's tears," Black Brow affirmed, "simply demoralize me. Either at short or long distance. I am going over to tell her that tears never bought a husband. In the meantime you think of something else to say in case that doesn't cheer her."

"I don't know why you want to bother with her. We ought to be getting on," the Lizard's son insisted, but his curiosity being equal to his companion's, he headed quickly enough for the tree which should have been a weeping wil-

low, he thought, in order to be artistically true to the occasion. Martyn had only heard of weeping willows. Pessimistically, he considered that they probably grew in places that were inconvenient for most weeping women to reach.

However red and amusing her nose, this crying woman that Black Brow had seen turned out to be a grave mistake.

"Oh," he was disappointed. "I thought you were a lady in distress. You're only a little girl."

"I'm nearly thirteen," she said stiffly, sniffing. "I'm small for my age," she admitted, but with suspicion.

Black Brow chose to argue the matter. "Well, I was going to be sympathetic and you spoiled it. I save my sympathy for well-built women. Now you are not built in any particular manner. In fact, there is nothing to you. You can't possibly weigh more than half of a pound and I don't believe you're anywhere near thirteen."

Her mouth had opened a little, and her grief nearly forgotten, she was about to go into the serious facts of her age when she caught Martyn's smile and frowned him out of it. There was a misfortune in her life and no man was going to take it lightly. Her queer tawny eyes became very wet. Her nose reddened further and the Lizard's son was certain she intended screaming.

"Now look out," he warned. "One more sad sound out of you and we will run for weeks. Won't we, Black Brow? And we would much rather stay and talk with you."

"You're making fun of me," she accused, wiping her face on a shabby little sleeve. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "I've lost my two rubles," she said gloomily and burst into tears without thinking twice about it.

Their smiling sympathy had been too much for her. The men averted their eyes and thought uneasily of the small riches in their pockets. An hour's adroit work had promised

them freedom from worry for many a month. But two rubles in the country made a respectable girl's wage for a fortnight. Two rubles meant a great deal of food to a poor family. This child had lost two rubles and would certainly receive a beating. Two rubles . . .

"Oh, we'll give you the two rubles," they said in troubled unison.

"No," she replied virtuously, sniffing again. "I don't know you."

Then they jeered, cajoled and became sarcastic all at once. Whose fault was it, then, that they didn't know one another? If she had been a politely brought-up little girl, she would have introduced herself to a pair of nice men who had gone out of their way to wipe her tears. It wasn't too late yet.

"Nadya," she confessed her name to be under this system of pressure.

" 'Nadya'?" Martyn was in a teasing mood. "Why, every second woman in Russia is christened 'Nadya'."

She tilted her red nose. "I suppose," she said rudely, "that I christened myself!"

"You have enough character for two little girls your size," Black Brow approved. "You let her alone, Martyn."

To extended questionings Nadya maintained that that was all the name she owned. Their curiosity was like a thorn in her tongue until it yielded all they wished to know:

She had been left, a sick baby, with a poor family in Taganrog. Her parents had promised to return within the month for her. They had neither returned nor written her foster-family. All that was twelve years ago. The two men gathered that there was so much poverty in that house that no room was left for affection, and Nadya had been apprenticed to work in the fields for her bread. Now she had lost half of a month's wages and more than one beating

waited for her. It was a sorry little story and her listeners felt that something would have to be done about it.

After a time Nadya accepted their present of two rubles and said candidly that she had thought more than once of running away. Just anywhere at all. If her mother and father had not thought of her in twelve years, it wasn't likely they would think of her in the next twelve. At any rate she was not going to wait. Martyn thought that in view of the prospective beatings it was a good idea not to go back to the old place.

Black Brow said warmly, "Well, if you are really going to run away, you had better plan to run with us. You're much too young and silly to run by yourself. And the world isn't kind to runaways unless they have muscles. Now my muscles are superb."

Nadya seemed to be conscience-ridden. The family needed the two rubles dreadfully. Martyn said that as far as that was concerned, he and his friend would send the family a nice sum of money from the next city and there would be no hard feelings left because of her departure. And she could always return to Taganrog when she became rich and famous. That hadn't occurred to her, she said, but it was a thought, now, wasn't it? So then they all put their heads together and she learned about the Lizard's band. Living a life like that would be splendid, she believed.

"And you may run away from us whenever you feel you must," Martyn promised. "It's time we went on our way. Do you want to ride with me or him?"

"Oh, I can't ride a horse!" she protested. "I've never been on a horse. I'm frightened to death of horses! They're perfectly beautiful but I'm frightened to death of hor—"

She found herself sitting before Black Brow on his horse. Either that man or a cloud had wafted her there.

"Ooh," she said, feeling very silly, "the ground looks terribly far down, doesn't it?"

Martyn said simply, "Nadya, I'm going to love you very much."

"Do let her alone." Black Brow was annoyed. "The moment there's anyone around who has possibilities, you burst into velvet speech."

"I mean it now."

"She's a funny infant. That's all."

"Not with her eyes. Nor her mouth. And in spite of her swollen nose I love her. And many infants of her age are married." Martyn hummed a song and rode ahead so that she saw his horsemanship. It was glorious, she thought and wondered if he became tired, riding like that. Now this bobbing up and down that Black Brow forced her to was terrible. It wasn't a bit unlikely that she would be unable to walk for weeks afterward.

When they reached the camp, the Lizard's son placed Nadya before him.

"Another girl to earn the kopecks in the towns," he announced while the band gathered about them, a little curious, a bit hostile, but with an inclination toward friendliness as once they had gathered about Black Brow. It was necessary to name him for he gave none. The Lizard's band was anything but stupid. They could see that a tragedy lay furrowed between his eyes and they labelled him accordingly. Now the Lizard came to the center of attraction.

"How! That skinny little female?" she asked incredulously. "When a woman shows herself to dance and entertain, the populace wants to see something besides bones!"

"Well said," Martyn replied indifferently. "However, she's said she can dance a little, and after her supper she may oblige us. Will you oblige us, Nadya?"

To her embarrassed stutterings the crowd cried in delight:

"Modest little flower!"

"Reminds you of Marianna, doesn't she?"

"There's one honest girl for you. She's not smitten with her talent!"

"If we give her enough to eat and Martyn doesn't tease her to death, she may look like a woman in another thirteen years. Didn't Martyn say she was thirteen?"

"Nearly thirteen," he answered, holding Nadya's chin. "What do you think of that? Nadya, are you going to love me when you are older?"

"How should I know?" Her eyes were alight with peevishness. "You can't love anyone just because you're asked!"

He pulled her back to him as she thought of escape. "But Nadya, you want to love, don't you?"

"That's no concern of yours."

"Come back here! . . . Don't you know that love is the wine of life? And you're going to drink just as much as you can?"

"Yes," her lips answered in desperation. But, "You talk like an insane ass," her eyes accused.

He kissed her forehead. "Nadya, promise me that you will exercise discretion in your drinking? For when a woman finds a bitter love, there's a phantom in it. I won't have you worried by phantoms."

"You *are* an ass," she screeched and fled from him, terrified.

The tormentor pursued, jailing her easily with an arm. "There, now, forgive your big brother, Martyn, and he will promise not to talk so far beyond your years that you become muddled. Did you know that your chin was smudged? And that your nice little ears instill an equal doubt?"

"Let me alone, you—you *Martyn!*"

The band closed in about them, hysterical at her ineffec-

tual pounding fists, her frank bawling. Someone came running out of nowhere at all with a basin of water. Another leaped into the play with a clean rag and a cup of grease. The Lizard's son sat himself on a hummock, and pinioned his victim to his knees. With a becoming solemnity he went about washing her face and neck.

"Why, Nadya," reprovingly, "your ears are even trembling. Look, my friends, she thinks she's a rabbit."

"I hate you," she sobbed.

Black Brow rescued her at last. "Never mind, Child. It's said that gypsies never wash, particularly the Lizard's. This scouring you have had is just a rite. You are very clean now, and fate being willing, you need never wash again."

IX

WHENEVER the screechings of the children in the camp annoyed her and the Lizard was inclined to particularly mean snobbishness, Nadya rode or walked about the country with Martyn or Black Brow or both of them. The astonishingly clean little villages they saw gave her a new perspective: apparently people could be happy and just as interesting when they had cleaner places to live in, and people who were very rich indeed, living in great cities, must be very fascinating, very much to be envied. Secretly she determined to find out that matter for herself.

Sometimes Black Brow hated to give up his card-playing to go with them. "Look at her," he would rail to the squatting group of men whose wealth he won fairly if consistently. "She would, of course, come flying right into the middle of a hand, and want me to lose all these moneys, all for a baby's notion that the flowers in the next verst are more beautiful and I must go and smell them. The silly little thing never seems to realize that when one has lived with the Lizard for a time, one might sniff at a rose, even, and be unconvinced it were anything but an onion."

Then Nadya would poke a sharp little forefinger between his shoulder blades and call him a disagreeable king of spades, a creature blacker than a coal, one utterly without a sense of what was beautiful or even right, and when he had proved his last trick, scooping up his winnings, she would battle with him again over how much she deserved for having inspired him to such a splendidly profitable if angry victory. If she had ever failed to do any of these things he would have

been surprised, if not abnormally hurt. He enjoyed her sarcasms, and pretended often to a mightier wrath than he felt. Whenever Black Brow could roar, he felt himself a truer man. He roared seven times a week.

If to him a rose had no more charm than a common leek, the Lizard's son displayed an infrequent finer sensibility and made up in song for his friend's defections:

> "Lady fair, our ways must sever
> Will thy love forsake me never
> But through distant lands forever
> Will it follow me?"

sang Martyn, richly, tenderly, almost as though he meant it:

> "Brightness of the day departed
> As this lonely journey started
> But through mountains, heavy-hearted
> Oft I'll call to thee."

sang Martyn, and the song, aching-sweet, struck through a sky of purple calm fretted with a million white-flamed stars.

They lay there, flat on their bellies, those members of a wandering band, like chameleons charmed by a nightingale's gold throat, while the logs in the campfire crumpled to red ash. It was Martyn's birthday. Withered and worn the Lizard crept among them all, giving out bread, portions of a stolen cow, koumiss and stronger things to drink, grumbling to her niggardly self the while. He helped himself to broiled beef, and waved a cup of wine to Black Brow who was staring at the fields.

"Why don't you drink in my honor, my friend?"

"I've filled myself to your honor. I'm thinking."

"Heaven forbid. Of what?" drawing closer. "What a wonderful night this is," softly. "It was on such a night you joined us, remember? They all thought you were a prince in disguise but I knew better—princes are men whose trouble is

of the body or mind; yours was of the spirit. Was I right?"

Black Brow seemed to be counting stars.

"Princes have no souls. I know. I'm a prince, son of a gypsy queen." At his friend's silent laughter, "I know, but they tell me that once she was very beautiful and had a mind for beauty. And her lovers were quite handsome. Seems improbable now, doesn't it?" His smile robbed the words of most of their cruelty.

A handsome youth, that Martyn, his companion thought. Tallest of the band. Gray-green eyes that could blaze in fury. A mouth with a wicked fleeting twist, somehow wonderful. A slow smile like the growing illumination of candles in a church, only there was nothing holy about Martyn. How could there be, in the offspring of a lizard?

Martyn tapped a bottle. "You know, you have stayed with us an amazingly long time. I take it as a personal compliment. What is the reason for your fine affection?"

Black Brow moved restlessly, wishing a plague on introspective vagabonds. "And why is it that tonight of all nights you feel inclined to ask such stupid questions?"

"Because I find myself most fond of you tonight. Because I know that some morning we shall wake up and find that you have gone like the night wind. Do satisfy my curiosity. What really keeps you—those women around the fire or these men with their dreams of other women?"

Black Brow looked about him in amusement, and saw Mihaseh, stubby of nose and quick of tongue, Marianna with the blackest eyes in old Russia, Feornik with his fat hands, and his fat face like an old moon. He saw Chatnoff who was a good tailor until Marianna danced with him twice and made him a better thief. Others had come into the band as the first married or became respectable and ran away, or died with black pox and cholera and one unpleasant death or another. It was said that the original band had been most

talented, the women never lacking for ear-rings and embroidered petticoats, nor the men for nicotine and drink. Now the Lizard was left alone, lost in cellared dreams of her radiant youth. Martyn roused himself to take Nadya's hands.

"I do not feel lucky tonight or I would tell your fortune. Nadya, if God were to say to you, 'What would you like most in all the world?'—what would you answer?"

"I don't know. I want so many things!"

"Well, first of all, what?"

"Well, first af all," screwing her right forefinger into the palm of her left hand, "I should ask for a great name."

"That is easy," he scoffed. "Perhaps we shall marry you to a great name. It amounts to about the same. Many ladies in the world think it an excellent thing to match their wits for. Marriage makes for most wonderful plottings. What next?"

"And millions of rubles. So many that I should never have to ask how much my jewels and velvets cost."

"Hm. That's more of a problem than acquiring a great name. The two cases are not at all comparable. A title is one thing, but millions of rubles!—and aren't you the hungry little savage? If you had said half a million rubles, I would have thought you a wise young woman, but you go babbling instead of many millions and prove yourself the child. Even the saints who are too tired to laugh must be smiling at you!"

"You asked me," she said dolefully, "and so I told you. You're laughing at me. I hope you bite on a stone some day."

"What a malicious threat for a mere child! You're the stone in my life, Nadya, don't you know that? You're lodged in my heart."

"Bah. One more of your velvet speeches, I suppose?" She turned from him, half-muttering a derogatory opinion, and

chose to lie flat on her stomach while she watched him out of the corner of an eye. He smiled lazily, clasping his hands around his knees:

"Absence may be long unbroken
From my lips no message spoken
Not a greeting nor a token
From far heights for thee."

sang Martyn, warmly, deeply, as though a parting were really near.

"Naught I know of my returning
So thy love I would be learning
Answer thou my heart's last yearning
Be thou true to me!"

X

Of all the persons in the camp Nadya cared only for Martyn and Black Brow, the older man more because once, when she said of the moon that it looked like a war-worn scimitar, he shouted in amazement, asking her crossly on the spot exactly what she thought she knew of scimitars and wars. To her slightly acid reminder of the storied conquests he had been describing of a night around the Lizard's fire he agreed, remarking thoughtfully, "You prove you have a turn of nice thought in your little head. It must be cultivated. I have never been a farmer but I can cultivate your head." Then as if not to lose another moment he began teaching her to write on the dirt with a pointed stick, and later to read, keeping her at one thing or another every day. He sang songs that stirred her feelings, told her of places her mind could reach if her body never. Of this generosity and knowledge he had not spared to build a library in words for her, a bible of what a life might be. He made her promise that she must do with her life what she wanted most, if to her heart she acted true. And for every single thing of worth and beauty that he taught her, he made a jest immediately after. He laughed often but often there was strange body to the sound he made and Nadya felt it was to take the place of weeping. Yet Black Brow had a wit, using it to show her the tart comedy innate in the Lizard's band as it moved giddily about the provinces.

Russia stretched endlessly before and behind them with infinite pockets for despoiling. Whenever food was needed in great quantity, these citizens strayed to good farming

country, and if much had to be stolen, they meant never to return. For several nights before their planned stealings the band gave entertainment, telling fortunes, some of the men playing fiddles and harmonicas with such skill that invariably the peasantry listened only to dance, flinging themselves with red-faced abandon into mazurkas, folk-dances, individual accomplishments wherein stamping, fiendish twirling and shouting were all legitimate part and parcel. Sometimes a few of the band would mount a scene before a wagon, and turn themselves into lords and ladies for a night. No matter that their feet and necks were grime-bespattered or that their blouses hung ragged from their arms. They were wonderful people from another world. They were actors and their rude witticisms, their mimicry of distant barons threw the peasantry into fevers of delight. Chatnoff, who had once been a tailor and quite respectable, who knew what ladies and gentlemen wore in towns and cities, would mount an ass and with magnificent intonation and rolling voice take the audience into his confidence. He told whom each character represented, what he was supposed to be wearing even to an unseen but truly exquisite shirt. When he had finished with the disreputable tribe on the stage, there was no doubt left to his open-mouthed hearers that these, indeed, were very splendid ladies and gentlemen to whom it would be, ah, a dreadful insult to throw coins in appreciation. If those same splendid beings later stole their hens and potatoes, a cow or an ass in the night, why their victims supposed lugubriously that that was, in a manner of speaking, rather high payment. They seldom thought of pursuit for prospects of rebate, and reflected too, that not enough coins had left their pocketbooks for Marianna's dancing feet to be protected from chilblains in the winter.

Only once or twice did an irate group of farmers pursue them and take back all their produce in revenge, tweaking in the bargain the Lizard's contemptuous nose. That misfortune she blamed on the fact that the moon was high; afterward their deeds were done when there was no moon at all, or one discreetly withdrawn from the view of such thieving pantaloons.

Martyn kept Nadya as far from all this mixed buffoonery as circumstances would permit. If she chose to dance sometimes, that was her own affair, but he and Black Brow saw to it that she was never shown the tricks of her lustier mates. Whenever the Lizard spoke her mind on Nadya's earning capacity, she was glared into momentary silence that never lasted longer than a breath.

"Marianna," she grumbled, "Feornik's Catherine. Johanna, Elena, Louisa! There are girls for you. They do things. They at least tell fortunes. They make up to men and get money and presents. But this Nadya—what of her? We camp and she goes off. She's gone now. Who knows where she's gone? Tell me that? She pretends to like us but I know better. Too good for us all, that's what she is. With half a chance she'd slip away. But what of that? What good is she—tell me that? But you'll lie for her, both of you. You needn't tell me."

"She's growing into a charm for one's eyes," Martyn said. "That's enough good. But go on. Talk, if it makes you hate her less."

"Hate! I wouldn't waste any on her. But she's a fool. She just walks or sits around as if she's waiting for something to happen. What does she think she's waiting for?"

She sniffed, scratching her bony chest, convinced she was catching cold altogether too early for the time of year. Black Brow said affably, "If you don't let her do as she pleases,

Martyn and I will leave her in a convent. I don't know but what she would be better off there, anyway, than be henchwoman to the Lizard and breast companion to a circle of thieves. What do you say, Martyn?"

"And who asked *you* to join the Lizard?" she demanded, sneezing to her discomfiture. "You can get out for all I care. Now, if you like."

He ignored her, knowing that she thrived upon her outbursts, thinking of a time when Nadya's arm was reddened where a peasant fellow had seized her. He had flung the rude youth onto some prickly weeds and put his own arm about her. Then Martyn grasped his wrist, lips smiling but eyes dull. "If Nadya needs that kind of consolation, I shall always be on hand." His voice had been rich like old velvet when he said, "Now look at me, Nadya." And she looked, her mouth trembling, but as his eyes held hers something passed between to still the terror of her lips. She smiled. Black Brow knew that Martyn's silent promise had been one of sweetest courtesy and clear friendship for as long as he might live to give them. And Black Brow knew, too, that for once Martyn's lips did not belie the story in his eyes.

Of course, the Lizard's son, sitting there now with his fingers closed loosely on his belt, loved her. And of course, he would lose her. Of that Black Brow was quite sure. God had never allowed a man wanting one thing alone to have that thing without the price of sorrow. A Lizard and her breed might bleed within, perhaps slowly die, but never would they have the gift of tears, and without that they would lose their heart's dearest hope.

Turning wearily, Black Brow chose to lie awhile upon his back. What a pity it was that man had to be born with a capacity for tragedy or he was not at all a man. What a pity that a woman bore a body made for love and, having loved, would wither to mockery of her love's desire. And what

a pity that man had not been born a fish to swim eternal seas and never think of God.

"Look at him," the Lizard cackled, watching. "There he lies and grins, just as though he knew everything. The fool!"

XI

"I saw a colored picture of our Czarina today," Nadya said. "It was in a shop-window. She had emeralds in her earrings, and yellow stones in her rings. What are the yellow stones?"

"Those?" The Lizard's son always had an answer for everything. "Oh, those were yellow emeralds. Didn't you know that?" But his eyes said, "You may be seventeen or eighteen, but you're still a little goose."

Black Brow became intensely scornful. "Those are topazes. I know, because once I gave some to a woman who was going to be my wife. But she went instead to live with a man who could give her pearls enough to lie on. She was one to love luxury for her lying!"

"Is that why you wander round the world?"

"I'm an exile of the conscience. Do you know this?

> **'And the far and foreign country dries me without wind,**
> **And my far and foreign parents blame without I sinned;**
> **Here, far from my dear mother, three years shall I stay;**
> **In the fourth to my dear mother as a bird I'll fly away.'"**

The Lizard appeared to have a helpful thought. "I suppose," she said agreeably, "that that doesn't lead me to believe he strangled her!"

"Now tell us in all confidence," Martyn begged. "Haven't we waited long enough? Did you really make away with the lady who had an exquisite feeling for pearls? We shouldn't have blamed you in the least, particularly when you consider how much more fire and beauty lie in topazes."

Black Brow's natural scowl became more fierce. In his midnight beard quivered an acrid song:

> "For she was not one thing nor another,
> Mistress, wife, nor lover,
> Man she played on more than brother
> Plays on his own brother.
> Soul she had?
> I think it doubtful;
> It made no sound though slow it left her."

Nadya shuddered. "Of all the wretched songs in the world, he must pick those out. Martyn, don't let him sing any more; they make me nervous. Do you know what Chatnoff said today? He said if he were five years younger, he would go to America without thinking twice about it."

"With Marianna?"

"He didn't mention her. He said that he has been acquainted with gentlemen, he has been a tailor, and now a thief. And that so far he has done everything but go to America like his brother who has done well for himself. He says that a woman's black eyes have been the end of him."

"Hm. And what does Marianna say to that?"

"Oh, she didn't hear him. He took care of that!" They laughed. Nadya said coolly, "I know just how he feels. I want to go to another country myself. I want things to happen to me, too. Nice things. I want to live the way wonderful people live."

"She means," Black Brow divined sagaciously, "that she wants men to fall in love with her. I know. I can read her mind like a book. No, not a book—a silly pamphlet. That's exactly what her mind is, a silly pamphlet in capital letters that anyone can read."

"If she loves any man but me, I'll steal her away from him," Martyn promised. "Either that or kill both of them."

Black Brow looked at him distastefully. "I suppose that

even when you are dying, you will try to be theatrical about it!"

"I like my jokes. I was only teasing her. Nadya, if it's men you want, you will have more of them falling in love with you than you will know what to do with. Just don't fall so much in love with anyone that you see a phantom where a lover stood before. Only you're such a little stupid that you won't recognize a phantom till you see Death arriving on his wheelbarrow. . . . Do you suppose she will ever grow up?"

"I don't know. I can't think of anything while she glares at you like that. It's very funny. Do look at her. She looks exactly like a kitten contemplating its chances of attacking a panther."

"Reptiles. Both of them," Nadya said distinctly. She arose with dignity, pinning the front of her blouse more securely for want of something to do, and started to leave them, a retreat unfortunately made comic by a vine that nastily tripped her, and sent her sprawling. At the sight of real tears the men ceased their roaring to squat beside her. They brushed the dirt from her face and breast, and made comforting little sounds, small maternal noises that mother cats make as a matter of course when their kittens walk too soon.

The only other time that Nadya mentioned another country to Martyn, he asked seriously, "Aren't you perfectly happy here?"

"No, but neither am I really unhappy. I don't know what it is I want. It isn't this life that I want forever. I do know that."

He took her hands swiftly, kissing them. "Nadya, don't you love me?"

She answered carefully, "I love you very, very much, Martyn."

"I see," dropping her hands. "You don't love me very, very much." He added sullenly after a moment, "If you're not happy now, you never will be. You don't know what happiness is, then. How childish you are, not to know exactly what it is you want. I don't think you will ever know content. This life of ours is purposeless, even foolish, but in it we are our own kings. I am content. Silly little Nadya, what are you made of?"

"Nothing at all but trouble," the Lizard thought disdainfully. She had been listening and had her own opinion of that kind of talk.

Martyn went on, still sullenly, "Sometimes I think that you will always be a blind little thing. And I know that you will be always discontented. You have no eye for wonders."

Nadya wound a strip of grass around her little finger. She was thinking how she could tell him in so many words that when she first had seen him and been taken to the Lizard's camp, there was wonder in the taking. But now she wanted other people and other places. Martyn was a man and splendid but she had noticed more and more in the last year that he seldom washed or thought about it. Perhaps that was the way all gypsies lived but it would be so pleasant to live once where warm water was to be had for the asking, soaps and perfumes, too, and the kinds of music that gently-bred people heard. Black Brow had done this. He had deliberately made her alien to the life about her and now he waited to see what she would do. And whatever she did, he would be sure to laugh.

"Oh," she said dismally, twisting the grass into a ball, "I don't know what makes me so disagreeable tonight. I must be very selfish. Anyway, I don't feel the least bit well."

"You don't eat enough," he scolded, relieved beyond more than foolish words. "I'll have to feed you forcibly. I can see

that." He laughed, stretched an arm lazily above his head, and held it there, dark and lean, iron in its strength and such strength that for a moment she was sure he had reached up and caught a star. . . . Now *that* was quite a clever thought. She became smitten with her cleverness and then wondered with a faint alarm if it were really original with her to think that only gypsies could catch at stars and hold them glimmering for a space.

One day of that year Nadya rode alone into the country, seeking the ancient beauty in half-forgotten highways. She came upon one of a strange order of monks. Roaring with laughter he lay in a ditch. His face was parchment and his eyes, dried prunes. They puckered then and he held his belly, screaming, "A lady upon an ass, by God! I've seen plenty of ladies in my time but never could any of them stride an ass with better grace!"

Nadya halted her beast and said kindly, "You may be a son of Heaven, father, but you are also a drunken lout. Do get out of the ditch, please."

"I *love* ditches!" he shouted. "Oh, ha ha! *Ooh,* dear me, dear me!" Juice ran out of the prunes, making soiled tracks in the parchment of his sinful countenance.

"Well, why do you laugh so?"

"Because you are so terribly young and I am wise. Now I for one can see that God needs no gold altar cloths. My brother monks refuse to kneel unless it be before a stack of embroideries. We had words, at prayer, and I have been thrown out. Perhaps my partiality for the juices of the grape had something to do with it. One can't be always sure. Oof!" and he seemed to settle down contentedly.

Out of one eye he saw her waiting, tapping her heel with a twig.

"Yes, I am very wise," winking at her. "Wise beyond this

age, girl. God loves a happy man and a happier monk. Anyone can be a spiritual coward and need gold altar cloths to entice him to prayer. I laugh. I can rise to laughter at the world . . . and the world is mine."

He was silent a long time, so long that Nadya kicked her beast toward a closer inspection.

The wise man's mouth was open. His tongue lay broad and indiscreet upon his lower lip for all the world to see.

He was æons vanished in sleep.

XII

Several days before an Easter Eve Martyn told Nadya it was time she went to church and thought about her sinful little soul, provided she were still convinced she had such a thing. To her reply that she would have no idea how to conduct herself or what prayers to make, he said then it was high time indeed that she learned.

"Even I, who heaven knows have never learned a thing, I go to church once every twenty years. I shall go again with you," he said firmly. "We'll stand beside each other, holding tall burning candles, thinking about our sins. And after a while, at a certain sort of signal from the priest, we shall kiss one another's cheeks and those of our neighbors, if we happen to know them and like their cheeks, and we forgive everyone his sins, and determine to carry charitable hearts in our pagan bosoms for a long time to come. It's a pretty custom."

He gave her an address at which he would be sure to meet her on Easter Eve at a certain hour. He would have to go into the city earlier himself; there were one or two matters needing his attention and it was more than likely he would have to buy more discreet clothing for himself for the very religious occasion. She was to refrain from jewelry and her best shawl, because, with her face, she might too much distract the priest. It was rude, he said, to distract someone in the process of religion.

So she waited for him at the appointed hour in a corner of Saint Petersburg, and thought she must be very early indeed. It might be fun to walk for a few minutes in the streets

of this city where Black Brow had seen in winter the frosted palaces of the czar. As she went around a building a mountain rushed at her, drove her to the pavement, and burst into apologies as no mountain had ever done before, to her knowledge:

"Have I almost killed you? Do forgive me! Tell me you forgive me. Are you really hurt? Where? I was running away from a monitor. I—"

She sat up stiffly. "I don't care in the least about your old monitor. What are you—a baby that you must have a monitor? I hope he catches you and thrashes you into a soup!" nursing her aching wrists. "You had no business in the world to be running like that around a corner."

He laughed aloud, in sheer delight. "And what business are you having at this corner yourself, alone, if you please? . . . There now, don't be angry; you don't have to answer me. You see that I have as much right as you."

"You have probably broken my hand," she said morosely, refusing his aid in getting to her feet.

"Ah, I hope not. It's such a nice little hand." He rubbed it earnestly. "What is its owner's name? Why don't you answer me? Tell me your name!"

She told him, thwacking him across his chest.

"Nadya what?" he wanted to know.

"What difference does it make?"

He held her fists. "Now, Nadya, say, 'Feodor, please let go of my wrist,' and perhaps I shall."

She muttered the politeness sulkily and when he had freed her, she walked swiftly down the street away from him, and almost forgot her destination. She stopped once with, "Well, why do you follow me? I am going to meet a man, I'll have you know, who will take great pleasure in making you go your own way."

"But this is my way, Nadya. Don't you believe me?"

"I should believe the devil sooner!"

He laughed again and with the swiftness of the devil bound her plain silken shawl about her mouth, held down her beating arms and carried her inside the building where they stood. He carried her up some stairs and locked a door, turned toward her, triumphant while she clawed the silk fringes above her lips.

"I am going to give you white wine," he promised, "so that your kisses will be so much sweeter when I want them. Really, you know, you may have apoplexy if you become angrier. Please don't rage so, though I admit it makes you look lovelier than ever."

"Are you mad? You can't keep me here! Let me out of this place! Now, I tell you, or I'll scream."

"Dear me," politely, "how was I to know you were the screaming kind? But if you must, you must. It won't do you a particle of good but I see now you won't believe me. Don't you know that the few people living on this street in sheds like these would be frightened to death at a scream? You have no idea what cowards people are. But I am waiting for a good scream. It must be a loud one or it won't be worth our trouble. Shall I scream with you?"

She stared at him in exasperation. He had succeeded in making the idea of virtuous screaming very silly. There he sat, stretching long legs before him in contentment. She saw the true color of his eyes. Amused, they dared her to amuse him further.

"Of course," he said softly, "I thought you wanted me as much as I wanted you. Your eyes told me—oh, so many things."

"Then you are cross-eyed indeed to see more things than there are to see! You looked at me and I looked at you. And that was all."

"All?" softly still. "It was everything. I had never really

in my life wanted to kiss a girl until I bent over you and saw your mouth. I saw your mouth," he repeated deliberately, watching her with narrowed eyes, "and I knew I had been waiting all my life to kiss it. I should be willing to die immediately afterward. And where was there a better place to kiss your mouth than here? But not in this light. Mouths like yours were made to be kissed in this delicious dark!" With a swift gesture toward the guttering lamp he had blown it out. His arms sought her in the wavering gloom.

"No, no!" her lips cried. She fled to the open window. "Yes, yes! I do so want to kiss you!" her heart sang. Terrified, with only time for scrambling through the window because it was so near, she felt the little roof of the street door beneath her feet. It would then be a short drop to the street except that Feodor caught her hands. His own were hot; his voice was brittle for its weight of ice.

"If I unlock the door to you, little Nadya, will you come back to me of your own accord?"

"No, no!"

His hands pressed hers slightly, once. "Oh, well. Then I shall let you go. But some day soon I shall kiss you, you little glass replica of a woman, and you will rather die than have it end."

She was alone on the pavement, and running blindly. She had thought that perhaps he might pull her back to his arms, kiss her bruised hands and then her mouth. He said he wanted to kiss her mouth but he had let her go. Trembling, she found her way at last to Martyn. He was impatient, waiting, and she had to explain the stains and scratches on her wrists, had to tell a tale of a drunken fellow who stopped her in a street.

"If I find him, I shall kill him," he promised, "and if I don't find him, the Mother of God will see to it that he comes

to a vicious end. Stopping virgins in a road! What was he like?"

She thought of Feodor, tall and splendid with the keenness of a sword.

"He was short," she said.

"What color were his eyes?"

Blue lines of fire they were, speeding so soon to the cold radiance of the winter's sea.

"Green," she said, "and bloodshot."

"Was he fat or thin or in between?"

Slim he was, and strong, and with beauty blinding like a god.

"He was a frog," she said, and wept into her fingers for lost ecstasy.

The Lizard's son looked askance at the jewels of her grief upon her hands.

"At least," he said, "the beast was not too prepossessing."

BOOK THREE

A LADY HATES TO BE ALONE

XIII

The streets of Saint Petersburg were hot, and dusty to the throat. The closed blinds of Augustina's house seemed to shut all the heat of the world within her rooms. She sat panting in her private parlor, and dabbed constantly at her eyes with a rag of a lace handkerchief in which the scent of old roses murkily bound itself with tears. Augustina's Leff was dead, and just buried with solemn splendor despite the awful heat of mid-day. Downstairs the funeral feast was being attended and already, as the guests' stomachs filled, their spirits rose. After all, Leff had died painlessly and suddenly, with the same graciousness with which he had chosen to live; Augustina had much to be thankful for though the poor woman seemed peculiarly unable to realize the character of her loss. They had been always together; what she lacked, he had, but charming matches had a way of ending like this. While man was alive he had to eat and if in eating his spirits became happier, why then God meant it thus. Somebody should go up and take the poor creature in hand, see to it that she ate a little something; she owed it to the world she lived in to keep herself well. Afer good-natured picking and choosing, the young Dmitri was selected to approach his aunt.

To him she said woefully, "What a ghastly summer. I won't be able to bear it. I simply cannot go on like this. How can I think of next winter without him? What shall I do?" She hastily applied the scented linen and lace scrap to her nostrils. "Everything seems so empty, so stupid!"

"There, there, dear aunt, you really must bear up a little better. Remember what a splendid fellow he was, and how amusing. How he would twit you now if he could see your tears making such misery of your face!"

Augustina blew her nose vigorously. "He never really twitted me. How can you say such a thing?" She thought ruefully that she might be dying but all these relatives and friends of hers would still treat her like an overgrown, if nice, child. "Leff and I had our little jokes on each other but he never twitted me." The black silk wallet dangling from a chain at her waist failed to yield a dry handkerchief to her frantic searching. Her nephew offered her his own, and carefully wiped her cheeks.

"Where is your rice powder, you dear goose? I'm going to coat that infinitesimal nose of yours and take you downstairs." To her fresh outburst he said, "You can't go on like this forever, you know. You've done it three days—two more than even Leff would have wished it. You and I may be dead in three days and there will be small satisfaction in having spent them weeping." Finding the powder, he smoothed it carefully onto her face and forehead, taking care not to neglect her throat. "I came up here fully prepared to grieve with you, but that's impossible at the moment. It must be because of your nose."

She blew it again, smiled faintly at his despairing ejaculation for the ruin she had made of his efforts, sniffed once or twice and thrusting his handkerchief into her sleeve, she permitted him to escort her to table.

The buzz of kindness, of actual affection, soothed her unhappiness a little. Of the culinary attentions showered on her she chose roasted young pig and small white onions pickled to crisp nicety, blood-red sliced boiled beets, and generous slices of potato bread. On eating these she was inclined to sadness again but Dmitri smartly placed before

her a favorite of feast-time desserts, a bowl of sugary stewed prunes spiced and rich with juice, garnished with tiny dumplings stuffed with nuts. If an occasional tear dropped into the dish, its flavor was scarcely changed.

Had Dmitri not been her most loved nephew he would never have dared to observe, "There is nothing like stuffing the mask of tragedy. Now, you see, every moment she becomes more recognizable as my cheerful aunt. Dearest, can't you eat another bit?"

She sampled her first dumpling and said quite sentimentally, "Leff would want me to be cheerful but I feel like an old, old woman today. Dmitri isn't deceiving me. He feels just the way I do, but I appreciate his—his, oh, I wish Alexis could have come here for the—the—" The dumpling would not be swallowed and her nephew said quickly, "Never mind. He will feel very badly himself about it. What a pity he lives so far away. Oh, I nearly forgot; Michael came here early this morning and kissed you while you were asleep. Told me he had an examination or something important and wouldn't be able to come again until tomorrow. He was sorry not to talk to you but said he was glad you were finally getting some rest. I told him he needn't wait; there was nothing, really, that he could do. Was that all right?"

"That was nice of him. And what did Feodor say?"

"He didn't come. Sent a message that I had to worm out of Michael. He said, I believe, that next to a birth a funeral was the most barbarous affair, and that he'd come when the crowd left." Dmitri smiled wryly. "That wording is not quite correct. What he said was that he'd come after the crowd left to see if they had left anything at all of you."

In the accompanying remarks indignant ones were loudest:

"He's the rudest fellow you can imagine!"

"To his own aunt!"

"Not a bit like his father and mother. Nor Michael!"

"But he's such a handsome creature," Augustina sighed.

Handsome men always had been able to wind her about their smiles. First her brother Alexis, an early brace of sweethearts, then her incomparable Leff. Dmitri. Feodor and Michael. Michael was handsome and certainly distinguished but it was a sane handsomeness like that of his father. Feodor was like an eagle, fiercely beautiful, and often unapproachable, as though he would rather break his beak than be annoyed. It was the Feodors in the world, she reflected, who made beauty a masculine thing, and color and love into gleaming threads of poesy, all the while tormenting one like wasps and hornets on a holiday. Leff had seemed a little like Feodor until he became so ill. Tragedy, too, was of their making. She hoped that Feodor would have the sense to fly out of currents that might throw dust into his wings.

"Boys?" Dmitri had asked of someone. "May I remind you that my cousins are older than I am? Certainly no one would think of calling me a boy," self-consciously touching the silky hairs on his upper lip.

That was a preferred gesture with him. The hairs were not many but of a most beautiful gloss, and he saw to it that various perfumed waters and waxes kept them to a gentleman's taste, or rather to a lady's, as he might have admitted under sufficient blandishment. A young girl here and there in the province had languished for his approval and finding his kisses most romantic at that early stage of adolescence had allowed him to be sure that he had only to glance, only raise his eyebrows once, to have them wait, palpitating, for his tender arms. Widespread admiration of reckless females would have disturbed him but for the comforting thought that perhaps he, too, as a great lover would have his appreciative chronicler. Some day when he lay old and sick in the splendor of his father's palace, a biographer would come to beg meekly the details of his glamorous life, and prove

the fact that he owed it to the world to show how one Russian of noble blood could compete in history with the exquisite lovers of any race. And as he lay there, old and sick, still would he retain that magic grace that had made countless women his slaves and men, his charmed enemies. Seeing this, the chronicler would weep a little as he wrote.

Dmitri's mother appeared to be laughing at him. She was saying, "This big son of mine, you know, thinks himself quite the virile man. He's been cultivating that shadow on his lip so assiduously that it began to fascinate me, too. So this morning when he was asleep, I numbered the objects of his affections. Altogether, there were thirteen of them!"

Dmitri's mother was an affable person ordinarily, and he was fond of her, but to a man inclined to be satirically morose with the sense of his own great destiny she could be a most shocking irritant.

His aunt who understood him better patted the napkin to her lips, and gave out a gusty sigh. "I've had enough," she said. Her Leff would have added, "Too much, my sweet." No, he never actually twitted her but she missed his gentle little thrusts. Dmitri saw new grief brewing in her eyes, and cried out precipitately, "I am going to order one of your own carriages and drive into the country with you. You need lungsfull of air, and immediately. Doesn't she, mother? Anyway, there are so many things I must talk to you about."

"I'm too unhappy, dear boy, to give any good advice, but I'll go for an hour. Really, I do need air. I am stifled." She stood up, giving plump, ringed fingers to the outstretched hands of some of her guests who still sat at the funeral board, and intended to sit there for hours to come, discussing God, the philosophy of man, the repetitious vagaries of youth and the shortage of good wines. The men stood until she had left the room on her nephew's arm. No sooner had her black skirts swirled across the threshold than the com-

pany, for all its genuine affection for Augustina, seized upon her soul, Dmitri's father impaling it on a smiling speech.

"My sister Augustina could come down the stairs again in a moment to find us dying in our blood and she would think it an impertinent gesture of her God. She has no pity."

"For herself she has."

"Not even that. For herself she has a certain admiration. There's the pity."

Dmitri's father was a fastidious gentleman, and wise. Had Black Brow heard him, that graceless vandal would have said, "She is a fish," and been understood.

XIV

"WHAT are all those people doing, Dmitri?"

"Dancing, I think. Can you hear the music?"

"Music? *Music!*" Augustina sat up very straight. Then it occurred to her that the countryside could not be expected to know of her grief and observe her own mourning. She had a minute of weakness. Music always got into her toes and made her feel ridiculously—well, giddy. This time, try as she would, she seemed unable to resent her giddiness and, like the fool she knew herself to be, proceeded to run toward its source. She told Dmitri with cunning thoughtfulness that he must be very tired of escorting a crabbed old woman and that he must stretch his legs and in the stretching see what all the goings-on were about; she would walk with him to see that no designing young creatures made off with him or his valuables. He chided her sweetly, knowing her weakness, and helped her to the ground.

They had not far to walk. The Lizard and her band were settled for a time in a shaded spot and according to their custom, giving entertainment. The first few peasant farmers had run home to get their families and after the diverting performances in which Chatnoff obtained fond applause, they themselves played fiddles and accordions to see how well the gypsies danced. When Dmitri and his aunt arrived, Marianna had finished to wild acclaim. Then, like a bull out of a pen, a pink-cheeked old man of seventy or more leaped into the cleared space, brandishing his fiddle. With a shout he bent his knees, thrust out his feet in staccato rhythm, playing his fiddle with savage truth to key and steps. The watch-

ers clapped and screamed. Russia bred a race of strong men and her old men were indeed masters of the young. As he danced, still shouting the song with no diminishing of breath, Augustina was aggrieved.

"He makes me feel like a pair of fossils," she said and went determinedly nearer.

The old man gave way in turn to Nadya, who stepped before the company with a disagreeable expression on her face. Her head ached and there was no medicine in the camp to cure it. The Lizard had given her a rank brew to drink that had but perplexed the contents of her stomach, and made her wish that she were either dead or working in a town like a sensible young woman for her keep. She could dance like this for eight or ten years more and then be just another woman in the camp. Her hair would hang in strings over her eyes, horribly like Marianna's. Lately Chatnoff's Marianna had lost heart for dancing and telling fortunes. She appeared to have told good fortunes for everyone but herself and Chatnoff. Marianna had had dreams once, too, and she had ended up with Chatnoff. He had seemed a good fortune in the beginning. All things seemed good in the beginning if one were young. Now Martyn and Black Brow were away again, stealing things. Some day they would be caught for a serious theft and then where would they be? They never thought of that or if they did, it seemed unimportant to discuss. When they came back, they would be nice to her. Martyn would tell her her mouth was a wonderful flower, kiss it, but his neck would be soiled and the kiss therefore plain. She had not kissed Feodor, but his kiss would never be plain. If his satanic majesty were to appear now and say, "I don't blame you for disliking this sort of thing. Now hell may not be all it is argued, but if you come within this red cape of mine, I shall do my best to keep you interested," Nadya was certain she would scuttle within

the lost soul's cape without another moment's persuasion.

"I won't dance," she told the crowd scornfully. "Anyone else can dance better. And I don't feel like it."

In a mood for celebrating any talent, the populace found her defiance captivating while it disputed. "What?" was the substance of its jeering, "are you willing to let that old man who might be your great grandfather show you for a lazy chit? Shame on your baby knees!"

Her eyes met Augustina's stare, and held it.

"Now what do you make of that?" Augustina whispered to Dmitri. "Does she expect me to take her side? Or what?"

"Nothing," caressing the young garden of his upper lip. The girl, naturally, was seeking this means to make eyes at him next. His aunt was an exceptional woman but blind, blinder than an old bat. In fact, all women seemed blind to everything but a man's good looks. Dmitri gave Nadya a languishing glance calculated to upset her cool demeanor but she pretended it had not affected her. It had upset her, of course, but some girls were clever. This one showed possibilities. She was bound to seek him out.

"Well," Nadya said, half to herself, "I certainly don't have to dance if I don't feel like it," and walking away, she sat down on a log.

Augustina watched her worriedly, explaining to Dmitri, "She's such a thin girl. And she doesn't look a bit well."

"Having, nevertheless, the constitution of an ox," he charged unfeelingly. "I don't mind telling you that I have had enough cause to change my mind about thin young women. They are all frightfully strong," he added darkly. Augustina snickered. The picture of Dmitri discovering that not all women wanted to dissolve in his embrace was amusing. She snickered again, but gently, and shot her thunderbolt.

"I think I'll take her back with me."

"What? That gypsy? Have you lost your mind?"

"Can't you tell just by looking at her, Dmitri, that she doesn't belong with the others? She appeals to me."

"Only because this is the loneliest week of your life. You will feel differently tomorrow. You know nothing at all about her. How do you know that she wouldn't make off with everything you value?"

"She appeals to me," Augustina said again but this impatient demand had instilled a quaver in her defiance. He was thinking of her emeralds. He might be quite right. They meant everything to her. If the girl stole those that would be the end of them and Augustina, too. "I don't see how that face could belong to anyone but a nice young woman."

Her last words were weak and Dmitri thought it time to discourage utterly this middle-aged philandering. Hadn't she enough trouble to oversee her own estates, to say little of the properties Leff bequeathed her? Did she want to earn a headful of white hairs years before her time by taking a young nobody into her house? The girl would be a complete nuisance unless trained to the kitchen. Was that what she was wanted for, a kitchen accomplice? He wouldn't be a bit surprised if she made off with staples, to say nothing of emeralds.

Augustina was bewildered by the dour aspect of his first statements. And she had not known he could be so marvellously logical. No, she had not thought of the girl as a servant. She did think, though, that it might be a kind thing to take the poor child and adopt her. . . .

Dmitri threw up his hands and peered hopelessly into her eyes. They looked, he said with bitter candor, perfectly sane, but probably weren't. Why, in the name of all that was reasonable, if she had felt this impulse toward adoption before, why, then, had she not adopted some poor relation or acquaintance who would appreciate it? Why, moreover, didn't she adopt him after talking all these years about loving him

like a son? Bosh and nonsense. She was having a maternal spasm that would be gone by Sunday of the week following, if not Saturday. Saturday was a more reasonable surmise and he would take her to the ballet if he were right.

Augustina said sorrowfully that he might have to take her to the ballet. She did have these maternal twinges, and if the girl were not so very thin, she might not have noticed her.

Dmitri swiftly escorted his aunt to the carriage. There was no need to split Augustina's fortune in any more directions than those already charted.

Nearly a week later when he called to take her to his mother's house for an hour's conversation, he found Augustina in a favorite parlor, one with gilt furniture upholstered in pink damasks. For an instant it struck him that she had been sitting up with no more support visible than a cantankerous disposition.

"Oh, it's you, is it!" she declared, clearly virulent, turning a cheek coldly to his kiss. "It was all your idea!"

"What, Madam? I have a number of ideas."

"That girl. But for you and your adolescent opinions, I wouldn't have had such a miserable week. Leaving her there has made me perfectly miserable. I'll never find her again, I know. I'm undoubtedly the most hare-brained old woman in half a dozen provinces. Letting a mere boy make up my mind for me!" She glared at him, fifty refutations boiling at her tongue if he dared argue once.

"Oh," he said feebly, observing that she was really seated upon a tiny settle, "I thought for a minute that you were sitting on air."

It was the most unfortunate thing he could have said for Augustina, like many women of very substantial mold, loved sitting on ridiculous little objects whose potential threat to her dignity instilled in her an even greater affection for

them. She was not unaware of a certain comedy in her position but she was in no mood for amusement.

"Pish! You're another fool," she said strongly and with that launched herself in a tirade that would have been a credit to Old Appa in a similar situation. At the end she perspired freely and Dmitri succeeded in helping her to the carriage only after making many allusions to his mother's foolish fondness for wanting to see people exactly the moment for which an engagement had been made. It was likely that she had already given up hope of Augustina and invited a group of spinsters for the evening. Then Augustina hurried. She disliked spinsters. They were such a useless race of creatures.

During the short ride Dmitri attempted consolation of a sort. "We'll ride out again in the morning and find that girl for you. It's fine weather and I'll wager those gypsies haven't moved an inch." He was very gentle but Augustina chose to be fractious. With her a bout of bad temper had the effect of a jug of old wine.

"What is the use? The whole band will be two provinces away by this time and heaven knows in what direction at that! That girl was just what I needed—young and pretty and probably clever. I do hope she's clever. Now that I've seen her and lost her I'm lonelier than ever. The next time I want to do something, I'll do it!"

"I hope you do," he replied sourly. "You surely make a man pay for his honest opinions!"

She softened, essayed a roguish glance and a pat of the hand. Dmitri ignored all three conciliations, and noted with satisfaction that her whole bag of affectionate tricks exhausted, Augustina sat very stiffly, thoroughly unhappy. Then he was smitten with shame for she had managed to look exactly like a fat little girl with whom nobody would play. Her underlip pouted outward and her preposterous

nose had gone again. He would have to make her return the nose. He smiled at her, sheepishly, and she took a new lease on cheerfulness. They sniggered a little and decided in a casual pair of sentences that the next morning would be a reasonable time to look for the girl.

To Augustina's relief the Lizard's band had not travelled further, having found life simple, food plentiful and changing company most cheering. Nadya was nowhere to be found. To the frantic questionings of the obviously rich lady the gypsies replied smilingly. The thin girl? Yes, that was Nadya. She didn't have to be so thin, either. The food didn't suit her. She said it made her ill so she didn't eat half of the time. For that matter nothing suited her so very well. She was most peculiar. However, she was not one of them. That was the answer. At the last bit of information Augustina looked triumphantly at her nephew.

"You see?" her glance asked. "Have you ever known me to be wrong about human nature?"

Dmitri frowned, gloomily dangling her cloak over his brilliantly polished boots. While Augustina fretted about the place Nadya came back from her walk in the woods and as a matter of habit sat down on the log where Dmitri had first appraised her possibilities. Sitting there she could dream of things that had nothing to do with the Lizard's band. There was no good in running about the world like this unless one could stop in gay, busy cities. But cities didn't tolerate wanderers who wanted to sing and dance for their keep. Singing and dancing were all very well but collecting kopecks for them was something else again. In the meantime one grew old. With this sage thought taking root in her, Nadya saw Augustina approaching. There was nothing for it but to stand, disregarding the weakness that had come upon her of late, bowing, yet disliking both visitors, the sleek youth more

than the rich lady. The noxious imbecile. To think he could look like a new-born calf and be taken for a lover! But she bowed again, murmuring, "Highness," with flattering inflection. Having made up her mind, Augustina wasted no breath.

"I've been thinking about you for a whole week. I can see with half an eye that this sort of thing is poison to you. And I've been inquiring about you. The women here seem to think you consider yourself above them."

"I do," indifferently. "But what is that to you, Madam?" her eyes asked coolly.

Augustina rather regretted what she had said. There was no particular reason for her to have become suddenly quixotic over this girl who might be formed for better things but who might be also as difficult to get along with and understand as the Feornik woman intimated. And what smudgy brats the woman calling herself Feornik had! They would be bowing to the ground one minute and just as she had devised a gentle opinion of them, they began begging for kopecks. Well, no money of hers had been wasted on them after the first small handful. Heaven helped those who helped themselves. Gypsies helped themselves to everything but cleanliness and honesty and even at that these appeared to have more of the latter attributes than most. Without a doubt in the world this girl, being as attractive as she was, probably would tell her some outrageous story of having been kidnapped as a child from noble parents. They all did, given half an opportunity.

"Tell me who you are," she said calmly.

"I cannot tell you that, Highness. I have heard I am a foundling. It's true, I suppose."

As she said something more rather indistinctly about having been forgotten by her parents, Augustina almost gaped, thinking, "Hm. She wasn't kidnapped but deserted,

—the next most dramatic thing. If I had wagered Dmitri on the approximate truth of what she would say, I'd have a pretty sum." But apparently the girl intended to say nothing more of her history except to direct questioning. Usually these people were only too eager to talk, pouring out their wonderful stories like wine out of broken bottles. There might be still some further difference in this one. "Have you been with this crew always?" she asked kindly enough.

"Only a few years. I was thirteen when I came to them."

"Then how old are you now?" realizing on the moment that the girl had placed her in an annoying position by making her ask the personal questions like favors, and answering only as she wished. Admiration tempered her anger. "Look here, my girl; tell me your name and all about yourself so I may know what sort of a person I am trying to help. I assure you I hardly ask these things for my own amusement. If you want to get out of this, I may feel it possible to do something for you."

Nadya stretched out her hands, her face puckering in distress. "Forgive me, Highness. I thought you saw that I was ill."

Augustina melted with sympathy and contrition. "Well, sit right down again. Sit down!" she ordered warmly. "What a stupid woman I am. I will sit down with you. Dmitri, go get a cup of water from that abominable old woman who seems to manage things here. Go and tell her—"

"The Lizard?" Nadya clutched her knees in alarm. "No, no! She's made me very sick. I told her my head ached and she gave me something she mixed. I can barely hold up my head now. She hates me. Oh, I would much rather just stay here. I shall be better in a moment. Really, I shall, Highness. Please do not trouble yourself."

"Very well then. But Dmitri, go and tell her anyway that

we understand this girl doesn't belong to her and we are going to take her away as soon as possible. I'll make it worth her while, of course, in the event she becomes disagreeable."

He protested. "We still don't know the patient's whole name."

His aunt took Nadya's hand comfortingly while she remedied the oversight. "Nadya? Is that all? I like that name. Dmitri, tell the wretched old Lizard or whatever her name is that it's really Nadya we mean. And be quick about it, my dear boy. The sooner this business is over, the better. How do you feel now?" she asked after he had gone.

Nadya admitted momentary freedom from pain. Apparently this rich lady meant to take her away. The nervous excitement that the thought elicited made her misery of less importance. Her heart pounded wildly. She might never be anything more than a servant to this fine woman but at least she would be in a household of good manners. There would be books, nice clothing. Clean lovely things and all the water in the world for cleanliness and loveliness. The last she wanted above everything. Even Black Brow who never admired anyone, admired that trait in his pupil. "A clean, nice mind like yours is one thing," he had said, "and an insistence on a clean body is another. And when you combine both without thinking twice about it, it proves you have been worth my trouble. Your parents may have left you with those old reprobates of Taganrog but they really must have been decent people. Yes, they must have been decent people. They probably died of the pox. That's why they never went back for you. You don't remember it, but many parents died of the pox about that time. Russia is full of parents and plagues and of the plagues, the pox most frequently disposes of the parents. You mustn't hold it against them. You were a nice infant and they probably were sorry about the whole

business." . . . Then there was Dmitri. Miraculously he seemed to have become a nearly pleasant young man. Perhaps he would fall in love with her. That didn't matter because of Feodor whom she wished never to have seen. Feodor, a name for war and romance. Feodor.

"I really feel much better," Nadya said gratefully. Augustina had unbent enough to hold her hand, patting it now and then, feeling an unaccountable warmth for the girl. She wanted to take the undernourished little creature home immediately, scrub her thoroughly if but to remove the Lizard's influence, put some hot broths into her sick little stomach and tuck her into bed. It was at least fifty centuries ago that of a night she tucked her Leff in his bed.

"That is splendid. You will like it in my home." Augustina blew her nose, wiped her eyes. "If you amuse me a little, you will find everything to your liking. My sweet husband is just buried. I can't tell you in the least what he meant to me. I am so unhappy. And I am not at all well. It will do me good to have someone young always in the house. I am glad you have a sense of humor. I'm sure you have one. The way you talked to that crowd last week,—it occurred to me then. You were belligerent and just young enough so that it seemed very funny. I thought then that my Leff would have been amused. He liked young people, or even old ones, to say what they thought. I hate to be alone. I shall be very good to you. Leff would have wanted to take you home."

Nadya gathered that Leff had been the lady's husband. He must have been a splendid gentleman. She felt sorry he was dead.

Dmitri returned with, "The dear old Lizard won't discuss Nadya with anyone but you. She says she really ought to see you about her. And she says flatly that she can't possibly walk over this far. So I have sent for the carriage. I

take it that you will have to make the call on the gypsy. The question is," impudently, "is Nadya worth it?"

He had half hoped that his aunt's silly idea of taking the girl away had died in the meantime, a hope actuated by Nadya's total disregard for him. Augustina disappointed him acutely by saying firmly, "Of course she is. Oh, I suppose I'll go and see what kind of an impertinent old creature I must deal with."

She stood up as Nadya arose very quickly for a sick girl and the three walked to the place Dmitri had last seen the Lizard. They found her looking for sticks and twigs to set her evening's fire. The fun ended, the rest of the camp clustered eagerly about them. Dmitri's beautifully cut clothing excited Chatnoff's approval, his satin-smooth face the whispered jibes of others, his handsome head the primpings of the Lizard's female contingent. Augustina was met with high regard and obsequious scrapings, due to her mourning silks and the jewelled rings she had not thought to remove before Leff's burial. One jewelled ring a gypsy could behold without emotion, but when out of ten fingers four held an obviously precious load, they proved their wearer a lady of considerable importance. They bowed low and smiled before her approach, dragging their wide-eyed, smeary children out of the honored path.

"Sell her, Highness? What for?" the Lizard asked after her visitor's tentative question. "She earns me money in the towns, dancing. Not so very well but better than most."

Augustina said brusquely, "She's made for something better than this kind of life."

"And what does your Highness think is wrong with this kind of life?"

"I am perfectly willingly to pay you whatever you think she might earn for you in the period, say, of her usefulness."

The Lizard hunched her back craftily. "She might earn me much. It isn't so much her dancing as her face. Not that I would look at her twice, but it seems that most people try to glue themselves near her. You will agree that there is no accounting for tastes."

"What do you think you want?"

"Two thousand rubles." The Lizard said it smoothly, squinting at the sunset so that her eyes rolled back upon themselves.

"Ridiculous. You're not selling a slave, you know! I merely want to give you a decent sum for the care you've given her—such as it happened to be! You're holding no princess in ransom!"

"Two thousand rubles." The Lizard showed her eyes, turned her back on the lady who threw out her hands, saying, "Very well. My nephew will draw up a paper of release. You will sign it immediately."

"I sign nothing," adding politely, "and at any rate, I cannot write, Highness."

"You can make a mark. That will be enough."

"No, Highness."

"Why not, pray?" Augustina could no longer hold her temper.

The Lizard cast a malicious glance full on her. "She was brought to me without a document and she can go away without one. My words are more honest than documents drawn up by fifty nephews!"

"You will answer me one civil answer, woman, or I'll see to it that you will do your answering from a prison! Will you give me one of your 'honest words' that you will never intrude in her future life, and that you will keep the rest of your friends away from her? She is leaving this entirely."

"'All this,' as you call it, Highness, means more to me

than any girl picked out of a street. No, Highness, not one of us will intrude." The Lizard fawned for a spurious interval, sneering when Augustina remembered aloud to her consternation that she had not thought to bring anything like that sum upon her person. Dmitri's search in his own wallet yielded little, but Marianna's glance, fixed in covetous esteem on Augustina's rings, gave him an idea. To his whisper his aunt replied in relief, "Thank you for reminding me. I should have thought of that myself." She held the Lizard with a light disturbing stare. "Of course, I could send my nephew to my home to bring me that sum, but I see no reason for inconveniencing him so much. I shall give you this ring," taking an emerald circlet from the little finger of her left hand. "It's worth more than the high price you have put on Nadya's keep. I have none worth less." Her voice became prideful. "Do you choose to take this ring instead of two thousand rubles?" The Lizard held out shaking fingers.

Beyond a comb that could be slipped between the bands of two petticoats, Nadya had nothing she cared to take with her. The members of the band hung about her, solemn, filled with a somewhat thrilled expectancy, hiding none too well a little grain of envy. As she bade them all an excited "Till we meet again," one after another paid his particular kind of respects, coming to wish her well, embrace her genuinely or wonderingly, or whisper well-meant words of warning. Augustina and her nephew watched with varying expressions of amusement, Dmitri silently considering the fact that women, when they fell in love with a fellow, however well-bred their kisses, managed to raise the very devil with his moustaches. He twirled his in delicious apprehension. Pretending to have gone back to her supply of sticks, the Lizard wholly ignored Nadya's outstretched hand.

"You waste your courtesy, my dear," Augustina called. "Come, now."

As Nadya climbed nervously into the charmed carriage and was driven away, looking back and kissing her hands to her old and suddenly frantic companions, the Lizard still chose her dry twigs. At last she brandished a stick in the air at the departing fairy godmother, and broke it in stupendous rage against her skinny lifted knee.

Chatnoff could not run as fast as the rest. He saw the Lizard's fury and very far in the distance white flowers waving that were Nadya's hands. Stumbling over a quilt on which Marianna lay, smiling enviously and picking at her teeth with a straw, he plucked the shawl from her shoulders and wept into its odorous folds.

Once he had been a tailor, a good one, and quite respectable.

BOOK FOUR

"WISDOM WAITS ACROSS YOUR THRESHOLD, MADAM!"

XV

"Now, my dear, where shall we begin? You seem to know how to greet a lady properly, and a number of other surprising things."

"Black Brow told me all those things." Nadya was inwardly amused.

"Yes, I remember. You told me about him. But why 'Black Brow'? And 'The Lizard'? Haven't those people any decent Christian names?" Augustina demanded fretfully, being impressed, nevertheless. From what Nadya had told her of the man, he could not be an ordinary person and know so much of life and people. She disliked mysteries because it was impossible for her to stop conjecturing things. Now every time she happened to think of the Black Brow individual, she wondered if he were not a noble, a grand duke or prince who had fled from complicated political and personal quarrels. Nadya's speech was excellent and she had learned it from him. On the other hand he was probably a learned idiot wandering in search of his mind. The world was full of his kind. There was the Lizard, no better than a peasant, yet her conversation had a sort of distinction. Augustina supposed heavily that any people running over the length and breadth of Russia as these had were bound to gain a certain amount of education, and gave the matter up. "At any rate, you are well rid of them all, the Lizard particularly. If she had dared to be a shade more impertinent, I would have had her jailed. And long enough for her to learn manners."

While her mouth gathered into small folds with as much cruelty as such a small mouth could assume, Nadya thought it an excellent thing that even more important persons than the lady Augustina seldom thought of jailings and whippings for impertinence. A slap on the spot had the desired effect, punishing the insolent and relieving the insulted.

Characteristically, Augustina had forgotten all about the Lizard. "There is the nicest fashion now," she was saying, "and it will set you off tremendously. Long tight sleeves with lovely puffs at the shoulders, a very narrow waist, I must say, and flounces from the floor up, higher than ever. But your waist, my dear, spreads too much to be really fashionable. I shall have stays made to your figure. They will necessarily be tight for a bit, but you will get used to them in no time."

"Stays?" Nadya asked a little wildly. "Those things with steel in them? I won't wear them! When you bend down, they stab you. I know. I've seen ladies in towns who wore them. They make you hot and damp and show the long steel things through your gown. The ladies could hardly move. I won't wear the wretched things!"

"Of course you will. Don't be ridiculous. Seeing that you have never worn them before, I'll have the first made large for you. Why, Nadya, once you become accustomed to stays, you will as soon think of going without your chemise. What colors do you like best? With your skin and eyes, and your thin body"—regarding the last with pleasant envy—"you can wear almost anything beautifully. Except red. Never wear red because it irritates me dreadfully. I don't know why."

"I don't like red, either," Nadya offered cleverly. "It's too noticeable."

"That's so. I hadn't thought of that. Well, we shall have

dresses made for you immediately, and when we have had a few more talks together, you may wear them to places." Augustina reflected that she had been very wise to swear Dmitri and his family to silence on the matter of the girl's origin. They were going to help her introduce Nadya like one known long to all of them, but not until the right moment. They were very sweet to realize she needed someone like Nadya to take her mind from her great trouble and loneliness. People of one's own blood understood such things better than friends, however kindly those might be. Now Nadya was sniffing again, over the stays, it seemed. "Don't be such a child," she barked. "You've just said you love pretty gowns and how do you think we can fit pretty gowns over a peasant's thick waist?"

Nadya was close to tears. "But my waist isn't thick like a peasant's. I'm thin all over. See, Highness," offering it for inspection.

Augustina was adamant, deciding to pick out her flaws once and for all time. "Do you wear your hair like that because you cannot do it another way?" She was going into this business of a winter's amusement very thoroughly, and with more interest than she herself had expected.

Nadya's defenses had collapsed with the last cold question, causing her to wish bitterly she had stayed in the Lizard's band where, should her waist approximate a barrel, it would produce no untoward comment. Gypsies might be dirty and they might be uncivilized but at least they thought stays barbarous, or better yet, never thought of them at all. What would Martyn say if he saw her now? She had left no word for him in the commotion of her departure. He had every right to hate her. And what would Black Brow think if he could see her in a day or two, encased in stays? He had taught her every tolerable thing

she knew and she had left him without a word of thanks for the teaching. But both Martyn and Black Brow lived in a lost world now.

"I've never thought one way or another about my hair," she sniffed, wretched because she had left those two for stays that would stab her regularly. Black Brow had educated her into the grasp of fifteen prongs of steel; she would tell him that the moment she saw him again; yet if she did, he would improvise some horrible poem, laughing the while. There seemed small choice between stays or his poems. Or her hair. Of the last she said woefully, "I'll do it anyway you like, Highness."

Agustina took her charge's admission of defeat pleasantly. "We'll pull it up away from your ears, then, and gather it—so. There," prodding Nadya's scalp with her own pins, "I think that quite quaint. It will do for a time."

Nadya looked unwillingly at herself in a mirror. Taking her hair away from her ears was abominably like hiding her blouse. She was ashamed, fascinated, wondering how long it would be before some disagreeable person pointed a long finger at her, demanding, "You cover your ears up decently, you hussy. Ears were made to hear with but not be seen." However, the Princess Augustina's ears were chubby, not a bit like her own, and it was possible that all naked ears were fashionable. She began feeling charitable toward her own pink ones, but a sense of irretrievable loss when Augustina took away her petticoats, one after another.

"Never before in my life," exclaimed that surprised lady, "have I seen so many petticoats on one female in summer! And what heavy things! Were you afraid of a sudden winter? Are you one of those people who wear as many as they can without toppling? Who embroidered these?" To Nadya's unsuspecting pride she went on, "Atrocious, my child. Forgive me. Red and green are slavic and charming,

of course, but when you let a certain shade of orange gallop into the red, that's a horse of another breed. But you won't have to do any more of that kind of thing. Cross-stitch, I mean. There are real embroideries that you will like to do much better. Don't look so frenzied! If you don't want to do anything like that, I don't intend forcing you. I want you to be happy," kissing her on the cheek. "To look as you do is talent enough for any girl. Now what do you think you would like to do best of all?"

"Read, Highness. When may I read your books?"

"Now, if you like. And then?"

"And then I should like to learn to be like you."

Augustina beamed. "You will, my dear. Your manners even now are surprisingly good. And some day we shall make just the right sort of match for you. A lawyer, or a doctor. Even a man in the trades who is a gentleman would not be objectionable. There is plenty of time to think of all of them."

Already she was telling some of these men in her mind that they were charming, and delightful companions, but not altogether suitable for her protégée's hand. Attractive now, the girl some day would have about her a breathless beauty if the proper graces could be swiftly caught. Augustina intended receiving proper credit at the proper time. She thought it exciting that a young woman could lack perfection in every feature but her eyes and mouth and yet radiate distinction of a kind. Her mouth particularly bothered Augustina, alarmed her the more she thought about it. Really, now, good women didn't carry such a provocative object around with them. If her mother had had such a mouth, almost anything might have happened to her and no wonder Nadya was a foundling. Still, that might be an unjust supposition about Nadya's mother. Augustina found herself becoming most disconcerted in what appeared to be

ethics and pulled at her nose. She pulled too vigorously; her eyes watered. As usual her wallet failed to yield her a handkerchief and as she accepted Nadya's, she explained gratefully, "That's what happens to me when I think too much, my dear. When I think, I pull my nose, and then it waters. I suppose Black Brow gave you this nice handkerchief!"

XVI

Feodor broke across his brother's threshold like a thing demented. Despite ashen face and tumbled hair he asked for a bag of tobacco and, receiving it, nervously made himself a cigarette. "Well," he said with difficulty while licking the paper's silky edge, "I've done just what might have been expected of me. I told you things couldn't go on like this indefinitely. You don't need to look at me like that."

"Sorry." Michael leaned against the table. "What is it this time?"

He was unprepared for Feodor's angrily contemptuous, "What do you suppose? The Musty Mouse, of course. I may have killed him. Good thing, probably. He's been meddling too much in my affairs and you know it. I saw him cutting across that street by my room, so I went after him. I let a couple of the Asses in on it. They held my cape." He laughed shortly and looked at his brother grimly. "Oh, I don't mean that I've really finished him," shaking off Michael's hold of his arms, "but he isn't going to be up and about in a hurry. . . . Keep your hands from me, will you? . . . I knew that he wouldn't be there for anything but to spy on me. He recognized me, of course," running the fingers of both hands through his hair, "and I made it plain that if he told on my doings again, I'd see to it that he wouldn't get off so easily next time. I've let him alone for years. Now you know that." Michael's stricken silence infuriated him more. "I tell you I've left him alone longer than he deserved!"

Michael was sick with horror, his body numbed as the

time Gray Thunder rearing on demoniac impulse had thrown him straight against the earth.

"His wife was dying in childbirth." His voice came from a great distance. "They sent for him. I think it was too late then."

"His wife?" stupidly. "Why, I didn't know he had a wife."

Michael did not appear to see the ash burning a hole in his brother's coat. "No one did. Even I didn't know until a few weeks ago. Tonight while he was in here telling me that life was a snare but a tender girl made it bearable, word came and he ran out . . . crazily. He wouldn't let me get a carriage." Michael shuddered. "I know now that he didn't hear me. Just as I couldn't understand *you* when you first started telling me this." His voice became keen, biting. "He's been studying all night long ever since he's been here. Working all day and never sleeping. He's been nearly starved always and we have been too stupid to see it. He wouldn't let me help him, but saved everything he could to take it to her. Where is he now? What have you done with him, damn you? Where is he?"

Bewildered, Feodor crushed the cigarette against his belt. "But I didn't know that the fellow was married."

"Last year," Michael answered, exhausted for the moment. "Her stepmother used to beat her all the time and he couldn't stand it. And when it was impossible for her to continue working at some miserable place she went to every day, he tried to keep her from starving while he was half out of his head trying to pass examinations. Oh, you've helped things! He's younger than you. Where did you leave him? Answer me!"

Feodor's eyes were slits. "Mother of God," he whispered. Then, with a choked sound that might have been due to first sight into his soul, he threw himself against a shelf of

books and struck his head against it once, twice, and again in a delirious emotion. "Michael, I left him out there. I—The others came back with me."

"You would do that. You would do just that! In view of that, you are a murderer whether he dies or not. I hate you for it. You're—"

"Don't go on, Michael. Don't say anything more to me for a moment. Just a moment. I can't stand it. I'll go mad, I tell you." He staggered into a chair and pressed the back of his hand against his head.

"And while you are having an attack of conscience for the only time in your life, he's dying out there. Dead, perhaps. I'm going to get him. Alexis will kill you."

"Stop it!"

Michael's wrath grew. Anguish for the brother he loved, for the poor little Musty Mouse he loved—the Mouse lying beaten and bedraggled in a dirty street—anguish for a baby being born to the rhythm of this tragedy made him revile Feodor all the minutes he sought for a cape to wear in his search. The surreptitious opening of the door stopped his mounting furies.

One of Feodor's companions of the night had entered. He was relieved to find him, and confessed that he had gone back for the Musty Mouse as he felt that the incident had been something more than a thorough joke. A physician was now with the Mouse. It was hardly likely that the poor fellow would live. Not so much because of the punishment as that his body seemed worn to nothing. A feather, really, might have done almost as much to him.

Livid of mouth, Feodor stood over him. "Get out, now. I've got to talk this thing over with Michael. Can't you see that? Wait—did you say I had done it?" And as the white face answered him, "I see. An Ass once and always. Well, the door is open."

He bolted the door and turned toward Michael.

"How much money have you?"

"I'll give you what I have. It won't help you. Running away, are you?"

"I suppose I should kneel and say my prayers while I wait for the police?" sneering. "I'm a fool by preference but not to that extent. What else can be done, will you tell me? They know now that I did it but that isn't going to cure Musty. He is being taken care of. And Alexis will take care of him, too, when he gets here. He will come flying when they let him know!"

What scruples he might have had in the matter vanished in the greater feeling for his own protection, particularly when Michael, after pulling his commode to pieces, said, "Well, I did think I had some left. But you took that last week, remember?"

Feodor remembered profanely. "Then how much do you suppose you can borrow at this hour before the news gets to everyone? You can't fail me like this. Your credit has always seemed marvellous. I'll pay you back if I must rob a grave to do it. Hurry. I am now going under your bed, in case anyone comes here for me. It shames me, but I had better crawl somewhere, I suppose. Try to get me a hundred rubles. I can go a decent distance on that."

Michael wondered dully how he could bear this feeling about to engulf him, how to bear it until Alexis stopped his weeping, for weep he would when he came. Never had he been able to forget his mother's death and the sound of Alexis weeping. People were more horrible than animals because they could not keep from making words out of their agony, sounds that beat in one's ears for centuries without end. Feodor running away would be like Feodor dead to Alexis, but if Feodor remained to meet him, Alexis would

kill him. Feodor must be saved. The Mouse was in better hands than his own and he could be helped further shortly. He must be made to live if love could give strength to his heartbeats. Now Feodor must be saved, Feodor, his blood brother, whose only grief was that the Mouse had a wife somewhere and that she might be dead. Prison could not give a Feodor conscience. Feodor, Feodor. A name for war and unremitting sorrow. Feodor.

"Just who do you think has all that money?" he managed to ask. "What are you thinking of? There isn't that much in the pockets of twenty students this day of the month." As he hastened to leave, he added sardonically, "Better collect all of yourself under that bed. You would hate to be betrayed by the tail of your cape!"

In less than an hour, through devious promises and pleadings, Michael was able to borrow a sum scarcely over forty rubles and a handful of assorted unimposing coins. Feodor took them without a word of thanks. Excitement mounted in a red blaze to his eyes. Already he had forgotten his sins and Alexis whose heart might break within the year. To Michael's, "Where can you go on that?" he returned sharply, "Don't think about me. Don't think about sending me more. Blood is thicker than water—in trouble. And if anyone in this stupid world ever hears of me again, I promise it will be you, though my promises are nothing. And probably you will see me when you least expect me."

Already he had assumed an arrogance and made himself unapproachable. His glance had become Augustina's, cold with the light of immeasurable distance so that Michael could not reach out to embrace him in farewell. He shook his brother's hand stiffly, scarcely seeing him, but at the doorway of a newer and more brilliant world he turned, showing something of his old vivacity.

"To the Red Sea you can look for me," throwing up an arm, "and back again, and you will never find me. I'll be a single grain on the soil." But he bent once and gave Michael a glimpse of an ancient earnestness.

"Then, my brother, till we meet again!"

XVII

The succeeding weeks were chaos to Michael's heart. After Feodor's departure inquisitive students tried to gain admittance to his brother's room, but he kept them outside the door, and gave them nothing to feed their morbid curiosity.

Alexis was driven up to the Gymnasium in his sleigh. In a few months more he might have driven up to see his sons leaving that school with honor, ready to take the responsibilities of men, but he came on the heels of a wrong, nearly dead from fury and stabbed pride no less great than his love and an old man's weariness. Instructors witnessing that meeting barely restrained him from striking Michael with his cane, almost screaming his rage that a son of his dared borrow from strangers to save even his cursed blood brother. The black cloud of a deceived father's suffering hovered fitfully over Michael's submissive head, sad reproaches weighed down his placating arms. At last Alexis was conquered by that frozen understanding calm which told him that he was an old man, and beaten, and that his remaining son was the staff he might lean upon.

Later they were both to know that the Musty Mouse would live, receiving their beneficences wonderingly. Later still Alexis would persuade himself to forget Feodor's loss in his older son's worth. But in that hour trembling with its freight of human anguish they knew that Michael had attained the measure of a man.

XVIII

To Nadya Augustina confided oppressively, "Well, it's happened. I knew in my bones that he would do a thing like that sometime."

"What has happened, Madam? And to whom?"

"My nephew in the Gymnasium. One of them. You have never met them because I didn't want their last year's studying distracted by girls. Michael could keep his head, but that other! There was a handsome fiend for you!"

Whenever anyone mentioned a man and that he was handsome, Nadya thought of Feodor. His face, his swift body, both were twin sorrows to her heart and mind. Uncountable times she wished that Martyn had never thought to take her to a church that Easter Eve. As many times she wished never to have fled from Feodor's kiss. Vain remembrances those, but however foolish, scarcely ceased her heart's burning.

"Feodor beat his monitor almost to death. He never could bear the slightest discipline. He was always getting into trouble with the monitors. And now he's run away. God knows where."

Feodor.

He had said, "Say, 'Please let go of my wrist, Feodor,' and perhaps I shall." . . . and then, "Nadya, little Nadya, will you come back to me of your own accord?"

And now he was gone. Feodor, Feodor. Of course he was the same.

Nadya felt her knees turn to water. It was frightful to stand like this, looking casually at Feodor's aunt with whom

she had come into Saint Petersburg, half-praying that the streets of that illustrious city would yield him once again. Small sense in praying, then, except for fools and children. Of no further use now all conniving, all artifice. Of no possible importance now her learning manners of the great, except that she loved them for themselves. She had received everything she prayed for, everything but Feodor who had run too far from prayer.

"I cannot imagine any nephew of your Highness doing such a thing," she said aloud, calmly, though her hands trembled.

"Neither can I. My poor brother is nearly mad with disappointment. He loved him so. We all loved him."

For the second time since meeting her, Nadya saw Augustina's face quiver with grief, her small lips grotesque in their effort at control. Always so volatile, so apparently incapable of arousing any quality of feeling, her voice bore that instant a tone of tenderness, allegiance. She appeared to be a really lonely woman but Nadya's momentary pity was swept away. But for the Princess Augustina's plans, she surely would have met Feodor months ago. But for the woman's determination to keep her charge hidden until she was a fitter companion for her friends, a lover was lost. On that one silly score a lover was lost. Nadya was certain that never again could she pity his aunt.

In spite of that, in the months that ensued, she followed her about in docile fashion, being amiable when Augustina was not, being amusing when Augustina was depressed, studying her books when Augustina inadvertently fell napping. She felt there was so much to learn before she dared talk to any in the circle of her benefactress, yet most of them talked no better than herself. It was with something of a natural start that she realized that her spontaneous humor and charm made more opportunities than the tutors

Augustina hired. Her deference to older people made an impression more lasting and delicate than any talk of politics or poetry. More than once Nadya was inclined to ask herself if a young woman needed anything more than a few politenesses and a pleasant pair of lips for their disposal. More than one affable man told her such a mouth could utter platitudes in place of poems and none would be the wiser. And Feodor had thought it lovely. What fun it might have been to say to Augustina, "Yes, I know your Feodor. I almost kissed him once."

Feodor's aunt would have drooped her lip in that way she had. "What? How could you have met my nephew? Explain yourself!"

What fun it might have been to say, "But mine was one kiss that he wanted and didn't get." However, Augustina would have had hysterics at that. Short tubby women having hysterics about the house were alarming things. Perhaps some day she would be able to say, "Madam, I am going to marry your nephew. We ask your blessing."

Feodor might still come back.

Dmitri was a consistent part of the pattern of those years. At first he had treated Nadya with polite scorn, because of the moustaches, but as she continued failing to be interested by those or any other of his attributes, that feeling turned to curiosity and unwilling fascination. Before his aunt Augustina she was courtesy itself, faintly tinged with irony, so very faintly that it would have brought him nothing to complain about it. But the moment they were alone she either looked at him with pestilential amusement or did not look at him at all. This was contrary to the history of any known beau. There was by some chance a flaw in his bearing, but how to correct it was something else again as it was impossible to tell how the vicious girl would react to him the

next time. Chaperoned by Augustina, she rode with him to the comedies or the opera, and allowed him to pick up her fans that fell to the floor with distracting frequency. He was inclined to forgive that failing because he had a talent for returning things to ladies with ease. Having to give her his own handkerchief when she wept at dramas irritated him so much at times that whatever incipient fondness he was nursing for her vanished temporarily in an absorbing passion to shake some sense into her heaving shoulders. Couldn't the little imbecile see that the hero dying on the stage was only a hero on a stage? No. There she would sit, weeping like a crocodile, her silly jaws trembling, and make unpleasant pond lilies of his fine handkerchiefs, dropping those, too, one after another, as fast as she could manage to drop them, apparently. Either on or off the stage Dmitri thought heroes inane creatures, told her so once and she looked through him for three weeks without comment. In itself that was inane but he could begin to breathe normally only when she spoke to him again. His mother thought her most amusing, and helped his frame of mind not at all by that innocuous opinion. In short, Nadya made his life a botch of woe and she grew to twice her stature in his eyes.

In the years that his father took him about the country and then through Germany so that he might obtain useful information of that country's memorable military order (Dmitri publicly intended to be a general in the army of the Czar of All the Russias) he swore that not one word would he write to her: she was the sort of person who, if she kept on with her villainies, would simply treasure the memory of having ruined a general. After dispatching numberless epistles to her, descriptions of camps and schools incoherently mixed with infinite sarcasms concerning her own probable activities, he finally succumbed to harassed protestations that if he were destined to go through life quarreling

with women, he would be inflicted rather with her particular species of abuse.

Then Dmitri came home to see that the foundling had learned to wear for a nice occasion a gown with a train and not become embroiled in its caprices. He was met with such hauteur that it convinced him she had been practicing long for his defeat. Nothing could be more natural; he had told her once at the beginning of their wretched companionship that of all the women he had known, she was by far the most awkward. At the time he knew it for an untruth but he could think of nothing to enrage her more. She had thrown a bouquet at his ears, which even had it struck, would have been ineffectual. When he condoled with her on the poorness of her aim, she threw herself on a couch, a young flood of tears, scraping her nose against Augustina's damask pillows. All his nervous questionings elicited but one mystifying reply: she hated stays; the things were making a quivering wreck of her and she would kill everyone.

Now her intention was to make him eat his words. He could see that with half of a charmed eye.

"How mature you have become!" he offered gladly by way of apology, accepting her gracefully tendered hand, and holding it longer than she willed.

Nadya looked him sweetly through. "May I be permitted to say the same of your moustaches?" And then they kissed one another on the cheek, amiably, and with understanding. Augustina was relieved, holding to her theory that bickering in families ruined digestions and that hers was bad enough as it was.

"You look in splendid health," Dmitri assured her. "Whatever is the matter, dearest aunt?"

"I eat," she replied comfortably, "and then I have pains. Why, I have no idea. Medicines fail to help me. I think it's my nerves. Nadya thinks it's my nerves. At

any rate I find I must lie down after eating or there is no living with me. Dinner is late now. Can't you two do all your talking at dinner? I suppose you will talk all night and not speak to each other tomorrow!" At the table she asked eagerly, "Dmitri, don't you find she has grown very lovely? All she needed was a proper atmosphere, although God did give her more than most to begin with."

"Exquisite. And I'm perfectly willing to keep an olive branch in either hand if she will restrain herself from seizing both of them."

"I have really missed your solemn idiocies, Dmitri, and I'll be very good tonight. I feel very pleasantly toward you now. Tell me, though, do you still feel that every woman who looks in your direction is wearing away for love of you?" She nibbled at an olive, and looked at him with some of the old malicious amusement that now he found so beguiling.

"I find it impossible even to think of other women when you are looking at me," he said meekly. "And I am sure that you used to imagine more things about my quaint conceits than were ever true. Didn't she?" appealing to Augustina who was eating her soup too quickly for her own good.

She held up two plump fingers in protest. "When I am eating, I agree with everyone. You should know that. What was it you said? Nadya, stop eating that pickle and attend to your soup. Pickles will never put meat on your bones. Dmitri, you will never believe how fast the time has flown for me. Nadya is the most amusing girl in the universe."

"I wonder you have not married her off. By any chance, have you been saving her for me?"

Distaste flashed for an incalculable instant in the pale fastnesses of her eyes. "How ridiculous," she answered

lightly, but her drawn lips might have said as well, "What? Marry a girl of unknown birth into one of my own family? You must be mad!"

Augustina concentrated her regard on beet soup made with tender roots and greens and thick cream, dotting it heavily with salt and pepper and toasted cubes of buttered bread. The roasted young chickens showed an unequalled stuffing of bread crumbs held to a transcendent unity with eggs, chopped onions and sage, mushrooms done to perfection in a pool of melted butter. The gravy slid from the silver ladle in a smooth golden current; with that she encircled a plate of steaming creamy potatoes ready to fall into delectable bits at the slightest touch of her fork. There was the waiting samovar. She could see on the serving board platters of almond cakes and tiny crooked biscuits glazed to mirror-like sheen with the yolk of egg and milk, disporting on their shining surface globules of sugar colored pink and yellow and lavender. Augustina scarcely could wait for the sweetly odorous lavender ones.

Nadya ate slowly, her mouth an unhappy thing. Dmitri's aunt was good and kind to her, saw to it that socially she was well received, said often that Nadya was as much to her as any daughter could be and appeared less of a fright than most, but there all fealty ended. The open door of grief that Leff bequeathed her on his departure she had succeeded in closing utterly. If it were ever to be held ajar for anyone in the world, he would have to be of her own blood. The door of Augustina's heart seldom had offered room for strangers.

Nadya was aware that she offered a source of amusement to the well-born woman, and nothing more. Her few attempts to earn real affection, however auspicious the moment, had been met with mild interest, and a peculiar satisfaction that people feel who are entirely sufficient to themselves. The fact

that not as many men of wealth fell in love with her charge as she had expected, worried Augustina. It meant that perhaps her engineering was not the flawless talent she had considered it, so she plied Nadya endlessly with every comfort, everything that might be further aid to outward grace. Tutors of every capacity she obtained, journeys to Moscow and once to Paris, lovely gowns, lovely settings. Seeing Nadya fashioned to her liking thus made her own self feel less old, less of a withered root waiting for its final stroke of lightning. For that satisfaction she loved Nadya lightly.

Men were not unwilling to pay court but for the greater number of them she was a little too beautiful, too remote for all of her wit and radiance. They were at their middle years and had no mind to spend their lives fearing the approach of younger men toward Nadya. Moreover, she could bring a man no fine name except for virtue, and virtue as a noble name was not the thing it used to be. Nadya would have no dowry except what Augustina might choose to give her, and that helpful woman talked too often of the splendid match she intended making. Gentlemen who came within that qualification feared for their futures; they wanted the charm of a splendid union to be their own discovery and not of the unromantic Augustina. And disappointingly, the few who were eager to beg for Nadya's hand in the first year or two had no prepossessing quality other than their wealth, Augustina frankly admitting, "However good they may be as providers, my dear, I have no intention of inflicting one of those bald goats on your hands. Nothing would age you any faster than one of those for your lord and master. There will be others."

Her protégée felt deeply grateful for this consideration. Had Augustina decided to accept the offer of any one of the goats who were really prudent generous gentlemen, there would have been nothing for it but to marry. At the times

when Augustina was suffering from her more difficult ailments Nadya felt that marriage with almost any man might be an easier cross to bear. Attempting to entertain Leff's widow while she lay languid, fixing one with a light morose stare, was a distinctly unpalatable task. It occurred to Nadya more than a few times that she had left the Lizard's ire for a more irksome bondage. Yet credit must be given the latter in that she could carry herself as she wished and not be reminded always that she showed herself as something above her true station. Leff's widow might be hard to please many days of her life but she owned more than one fine generosity. For her there seemed no strangeness because a girl dreamed kindlier things than the life she had been reared in. Nadya might never learn for a fact what manner of people her parents were, but she held to a fierce conviction that they must have been alive to beauty with the same quickening of heart-beat that was her own, and the same rush of quivering keen phrases to the mind. Peasants they might have been in body, but never in their minds.

Of that last belief she prayed God to let her be always sure.

XIX

When Dmitri had fully made up his mind that Nadya would make an excellent wife for a potential general, he brought his decision before his mother who was sure to approve the match, liking Nadya as she did. He carefully pointed out the fact that that small person had a peculiarly feminine enchantment, a sutble something that should go a long way in aiding his career.

"Are you sure you love her, my darling?" his mother wanted to know innocently. "You sound so much like a doctor: she has a good spine; her ribs are all in place; and given proper care, she should last very well indeed."

"Now, dearest, I simply said what I said to prove to you how desirable she is."

"If you loved her madly," still innocently, "you wouldn't know whether she had pock marks or not, whether she were desirable in the interests of a career or not. You have my permission to speak to Augustina if you have actually made up that great mind of yours, seeing that your father is not even on the verge of returning to his home. But personally, I feel that one marriage of common sense in this family is enough." As he stared at her she added wickedly, "You were not a child of love, my dearest. Ask your father if you think I say this to be a wretch," adjusting a hair pin. "He wanted an heir immediately, and to tell you the truth, I believe that at the moment it wouldn't have mattered in the least to him if you had been born nearly cross-eyed, and disporting purple hair. As it happened, you had no hair at all, not for weeks. I had never had accquaintances with

bald babies. I was frightened by you, I assure you." She stretched lazily, picking out a pillow from the litter on her couch, and watched his offended countenance with ingenuous triumph.

"A delicate time, now, to tell me that you didn't want me!"

"Oh, but I did. That's maternity, you know. You find you can't help your emotions in the matter. Indeed I did want you after the doctor swore to me you were not a phenomenon. Yet, when I began thinking that over, I was a bit disappointed. By that time, you see, I had formed the opinion that, because you had been born bald and belligerent, you were going to be a real—"

"Will you tell me what in the world," he interrupted desperately, "all these late revelations have to do with my marriage?"

"—a real phenomenon," she finished plaintively. "I was simply leading up to this: you are a phenomenon after all. You are to be congratulated even though I scarcely see the reason for it. Your father," she mused, "is really a kindly man, and I am a kindly woman (or I should not have borne you) and I don't understand how we were privileged to be the authors of your being. I shall speak to him about it sometime when he stays home long enough to be spoken to about such things."

"Do," flushing, "and if you can ever discuss things that mean so much to me without becoming so devilishly sardonic, I shall be grateful to you, I'm sure!"

As he flung himself out of the room her peremptory command halted him.

"Dmitri! Come back!"

He came to her side once again, and reddened with anger, then with embarrassment when he saw her eyes shining strangely with tears. Never had he seen tears in her eyes.

She drew him down to kiss his mouth tenderly. "I'm a vicious old parrot, dearest, and I promise not to profane your affections again. Your father is such a polite person and most of the time I am such a polite spouse, that I rather hoped our son would be able to love someone madly, tear his hair meanwhile and come home, looking a noble ruin. Do you suppose, Dmitri, that Nadya will be able to make a nice noble ruin of you?"

The sad gravity inherent in her voice touched him.

"I don't know that. You know, she nearly put me out of my mind several years ago. In all probability she will do it again." He kissed her face and fingers with real fondness before he left her to go to Augustina's house.

To the pillows her thoughts said, "Neither do I know that. Growing-up does such unhappy things to a boy, like giving him ambition. He has a soldier's mind. I would die happy if he had a soldier's heart."

Augustina was not at home, even in spirit. Her dressmaker had sent a message about some choice striped and flowered brocades. A wisely included sample of moss green with pink and yellow roses running across the width of it and a lavender twig here and there settled the matter. With that in one hand and a veil in the other, her wallet swinging wildly at her waist, the excellent customer had gone out of her house, fairly running, explaining to Nadya as she ran that the last two times new silks arrived she had waited too long in her selection and the largest women in Saint Petersburg had picked out the most novel patterns.

"If they hadn't been so large, I shouldn't have minded so much!" she called back from the street in self-justification. "And tell everyone who calls that Michael will be here soon for a visit. I've had a letter to my invitation."

When it seemed the proper moment, Dmitri became eager to inform Nadya of her good fortune. He placed her in the garden in a spot most favorable to the moment, kissed her hand with great dispatch and charm, and told her with unconscious tremolo that she must have been knowing for a long time now his tender thoughts of her. As he grew vocally with this, his first proposal, he believed himself gaining in dignity and wisdom of utterance. She must have seen in his letters of the last year how the change in feeling had come about.

Nadya was nearly ill with disappointment. For a month following his return from Germany she thought that he had become a man in fact. Now he was a young captain, a boy playing an army game, proud of his young moustache and upright bearing, prouder still of his liking for a pretty speech. She felt dreadfully older, wearied. When he gave her opportunity, she must accept him, sweetly. It was hardly possible he would think to propose marriage to her unless Augustina's consent were assured. Strange, this thing. She would have thought that his aunt would refuse pointedly, in view of her frequently uttered faith that this marvellous nephew of hers would go far with a wife of distinguished family, and that without such a wife he could go no distance at all. Apparently Augustina was fonder of her than she had perceived. Now Dmitri was deeply entangled; this was an affirmation he had memorized, amusing, if she were able to hear it less distinctly. Yes, she must accept him soon. His mother was a bearable person.

Aloud she asked quietly, "Do you tell me my talents, Dmitri, or are you asking me to marry you? Whichever case, you have my thanks."

"I shall make you very happy, Nadya."

"Not even in writing would I believe that," she told her-

self, and him, "How do you know that I shall be happy in anything but death?"

"Why do you say that? You sound like my mother now."

"She's a brilliant woman and knows life. Have you informed her that you propose giving her a present of a daughter who has no family and might not like it if she had one? Or didn't you phrase it so unkindly?"

"She's very much taken with you."

Nadya's heart gave a twinge, wishing it thought less of Dmitri's mother, a woman who had the ageless wisdom of the serpent. She would poke a mental finger most certainly into the heart of her son's wife, saying, "Do you see this drop? It bleeds for another man. Dmitri is a fool but women are the bigger fools." She would say that rightly. What an unanswerable gift of God it was that some women could be so wise, could love so much if there were the right man for the loving. But the right men never seemed to be the husbands of these women. However kind a man, Dmitri's father never could have been the lover of his wife's heart. *Feodor, Feodor!*

"Will you give me jewels to wear, Dmitri?" she asked brightly to hide the aching of her breast. "Princess Augustina has given me everything but love and jewels. The two need not be synonymous but they are enchanting when they come at once. I want emeralds, though rubies and topazes have their points. I want emeralds to mark the greenness of your love!"

He was staring in dismay.

"I forgot," he said stupidly wondering, not understanding her. "I was so eager to come here that you know, I forgot your gift. It was right on top of my commode, too. I'm sorry you wanted emeralds and those other things. You can have them later. I had two ropes of pearls for you.

I'll bring them tonight, and something else you may like better."

What was it that Black Brow said? It was difficult to remember when tears seemed to be born at her very lips. . . . "But she went to live instead with a man who could give her pearls enough to lie on." . . . One long rope of pearls she could have endured without this weeping of her soul, but never two, never two. . . . "She was one to love luxury for her lying." . . . That was what Black Brow said. She knew now why his laughter had had strange body to it; it was his guise for weeping. Luxury for her lying—and it was true of her own self, too true. She had wanted that and here it was, Dmitri with two strings of milky beads on his commode. Dmitri with two coils of rope . . . no, no! . . . they were two ropes of—*oh!*

Feodor, darling of my heart, you never would have thought of pearls.

XX

Augustina twisted the piece of rich brocade in her fingers, convinced that Dmitri had always been an ass but that it had taken her a quarter of a century to find it out. The fact that one of the large women in Saint Petersburg arrived at the brocade a day before herself and bought most of it might have served to poison her mind.

"Hm. So you want to marry her. And what do your people say? I'm sorry your father cannot be here to tell me about it."

"Mother, as you know, is fond of her, and you also know that my father likes his good-looking relatives. There is no dissension there."

"No. What a pity, what a pity. Dmitri, my dear, dear boy, you can have no idea what this means to your future! Your parents must be blind. Here you are, so abominably young in one way—forgive me; you are too young to marry until you have advanced another year. I had thought," watching him shrewdly, "that I would leave my estates to you and Michael, but I am afraid I shall have to favor him. I wanted you to go so very high, Dmitri. My estates would have helped you."

"I'm sorry," stiffly. "I believe I am my father's sole heir."

"Yes. Heir to next-to-nothing. Your father has an unsurpassed genius for spending. I've made him a loan recently. Now don't misunderstand me; you know you're a son to me, don't you?" At his relenting nod, adding, "And you know that I want the very best things in the world for

you. You must know that, Dmitri. You will not get them through Nadya. She has a face and a mind, but regardless of the question of virtue, she is no Pompadour who can make a man what she wishes. What in the world, my dear boy, can she bring you? She's a waif; the fact that no one but ourselves knows it does not change that fact. Of course I intend to give her a dowry, which will not be of appreciable aid in a career. I cannot really afford to give her much as then I should feel as though I had betrayed those of my own blood who have every right to expect what I have."

He offered with equal shrewdness, "Any dowry you give Nadya will be the equivalent of a gift to me. I thought you just said that you loved me like a son."

"I do not think she is the wife for you. You are young yet and the world holds a number of beautiful women of position and importance. I admit Nadya has done a great deal for herself. She would have done it without me. Do I seem an autocrat to you?"

"I don't know. And I'm sure I don't understand you. She's never shown any but the instincts of a fine person. She—"

"She's very clever."

"Now you are libelling her!" he cried furiously. "Whatever has made you change your mind about her?"

"She has always been clever," she told him quietly. "That is no insult to her. Don't you suppose she knows what it will mean to her to marry into a family like ours? I appreciate her. I am fond of her. But I do not want her to bear your father's name when there are others to do it with greater justice. When Nadya makes the good middle class marriage that I propose to find for her, she will be getting a great deal more out of life than she has any real right to expect. I can't talk very much more to you. All this is giving me a frightful headache."

Dmitri kicked over a gilt-legged stool, righted it. "Well, in so many words, what is it you want me to do?"

"In so many words, how much do you love Nadya? If you had to, would you give up everything in the world you think most of? You won't have to do such a thing, but that's one way of plumbing an affection."

"I'm very fond of her. I still would like to marry her, but not if she hinders my progress in any way. I won't give up my career for any woman in the world." The mental conception of cousin Michael's inheriting all of their aunt Augustina's estates was disquieting. She had been allowing him to believe for years he was to have almost everything of hers. Naturally, he would still be her heir if he continued to please her. All of his life he could entertain well if he pleased Augustina now. In spite of her reiterated fondness for him there was no mistaking the sharp purpose in her unfriendly gaze. Keen hunts, brilliant balls, open house to the nobles of his acquaintance, these things waited on the changing color in her eyes. He knew exactly what to say to make the color warmer to his sight, and said it with little-boy petulance that she had always liked. "And certainly I don't want to inflict any subject on you that will make you ill. I'd rather have you well enough to quarrel with me, if you feel you must quarrel."

Forgiving triumph lay in her folded hands. She had known only at the last that he would be amenable. After all, he was like her, enough to be her son. Nothing would stand for very long in the way of her objective or his own. Hers had been a life-long quest to find the real way to Leff's heart and mind. He had eluded her until the end when he gave her some of both, very graciously, as though he had found out only then what it was she wanted of him. And now Dmitri must be protected until that moment when he would have a son to bear the name of his father and Alexis,

a son who could pull at the shining things on his coat and say, "My father is a general." After that, Augustina felt she would be ready to take up the search again for Leff.

"I knew you didn't really love her," she said calmly, "or I wouldn't have talked to you like this. I love you too much to make you angry to no purpose. I have been thinking this whole thing over. Michael has all the estates that my dear Alexis left him. Of course, if Feodor ever returns, he will be generous with the fool, but in either case he will have more than enough. Alexis always was the wisest of us in every way," wiping her eyes. "I haven't quite as much as he left and it may take me an atrociously long time to die, so I am going to give you more of an income while it is on my mind. Does that please you, Dmitri?"

The bribe was most successful, but then it was a most generous one. He ceased pushing her parlor furniture about to suit his mood and came to her, kissing her lightly on the nose with assumed humility and enough of a frown so that she could see he had been really thinking. Then he kissed her more affectionately on the cheek, and then both hands. After that he remembered Nadya.

"Tell me what to do. I can't bear to hurt her like this. She's probably told everyone by this time!"

His confusion amused her grimly. If he had loved her, he would not have forgotten her so long. Young men, moustaches or no moustaches, needed no rope to hang themselves. Augustina could see that Dmitri's neck would often need her saving. She might have to spend the rest of her old age cheating his imbecilities.

"I'll take care of the matter for you, and I promise she will understand perfectly. You need feel no embarrassment on seeing her again. Now do go home. My headache drives me mad."

She permitted him to kiss her again, and after fortifying herself with a medicated powder, went to find Nadya without mincing words:

"Dmitri tells me that you may marry him."

Nadya raised fine eyebrows. "I thought I had relieved his mind and made it quite clear that I would marry him. I thought you knew beforehand."

"No. I told him both of you didn't realize what you were planning to do."

"You are displeased," Nadya answered coolly, hoping that her hurt would not be seen and made a thing to talk about at length, "and you will be happier if I tell him on my own account that he is a gentleman and has a nice title to which a girl born in a lady's cradle might better aspire, and that I may still hope to be a sister to him? Forgive me for not seeing all this before. I shall tell him. No, that is further presumption. Perhaps you will be so kind?"

"Well," Augustina sought for a more gentle understanding, becoming more portly and imperious in the effort, "I did not want to hurt your feelings, of course, as I presumed you had some for him in the matter, but considering your astuteness, it would be folly to pretend I am pleased. My dear child, I am very glad to have you with me. I am happy to do anything I can for you, but the last thing in the world I expected was that you would care for any man in my own family."

"Dare to care," Nadya murmured, seemingly intent on the gleam of her finger tips. "What a pity that with my appreciation for the finer things like nice families and nice old titles, I cannot remember having been born in a nice baby's cradle. Still, I may have been. My mother might have been a lady. Common people like peasants don't seem to desert their children, at least not so soon after bearing them!"

Augustina prepared to leave. "I am glad you exercise such good sense in the matter."

"Where you thought perhaps I wouldn't. I know." Nadya waited until her benefactress reached the door. "Yet how was I to assume that you would fail to take me to your heart? You have said so often, even in company, that you loved me like a daughter. Or was it only a step-daughter?"

Augustina pretended not to hear but her withdrawal seemed a little hurried.

Nadya swayed slightly in her chair, still looking at her finger tips and not seeing them. Instead she dreamed of Black Brow sitting on a drunken witch's stick that he had stolen while she slept. Of course he would be pointing his waggish finger at the witch's chin that was her own, and of course he would be laughing, "Hah! And how do you like your dream of being a lady? Wisdom waits across your threshold, Madam! Doesn't she, always? Or don't you speak except to gentlemen?"

BOOK FIVE

PHANTOM IN THE WINE

XXI

When Michael saw Nadya he knew he had been wanting always to love her. She was exquisite, high-mannered, a fragile thing, with an air about her of delightful intimacy. She had smiled upon him out of hundreds of people and made him partner to a secret pact of enjoyment. He loved her.

The ball had not been a particularly interesting affair until he stepped on her train. His discomfiture was profound, more so when he found himself further entangled in the silken winding thing. Nadya thought him a bearded elk of a man, nobly pathetic in the predicament.

"It is nothing, I assure you," she said swiftly. "The thing was much too long. A peacock with a tail like that ought to have it pruned; it's an affront to nature. I shall let you help me."

"You are much kinder than I deserve. Everyone seems to be looking. Really, I know that I haven't danced much in my life but I was unaware of being such an ox as I am. What can we do about it?"

"Do? Finish this measure, of course. Quick, our partners are waiting!" Then when the last steps of the cotillion had been swung she commanded, "Now take me to the garden. No, the balcony will be better, and I'll show you how a peacock can save her foolish tail with a pin or two and a delicate trust in God. Walk as close to me as you can to hide this tear. Splendid," she encouraged him when they had gained a flower-arched doorway. "Wasn't that easy?"

His eyes on the distracting orichalch of her hair, on the red mouth that the forgetful gods had given to a mortal woman, Michael answered that it was.

After they were seated in the balcony she kept a tolerant smile on her lips. So this was the Michael whom Augustina mentioned most often next to Dmitri; this Michael she had introduced as Feodor's blood brother. Then it was not at all strange she had felt from the beginning such a pleasant kinship in their glances. Blue eyes, too, this man Michael had, but not so blue as Feodor's. No other eyes in the world could be that deathless blue born of eternal sea and southern sky ridden deep by storm. Would Feodor be wearing a beard now, a frail beard glinting red like one this Michael wore? But perhaps he might still be carrying an eagle's black feather on his upper lip, a carefree thing and dashing.

Feodor's brother was speaking, slowly, as though he wanted his words sure of no discourtesy. "Several years ago I might have been able to talk to women like you. I find now that I've forgotten. It's a tragedy for me."

"And for me." He would never know she thought of Feodor. His brother Michael was loving her a little. If he loved her a little more, he would ask her to marry him, and it would be a splendid joke on Augustina and Dmitri, and herself. And on Feodor, too, in a way, because the kiss he would not take because it was not freely given would be given to his brother. This man Michael was truly kind. One could see that engraven in the tiny lines about his eyes, lines that quite probably Feodor etched before he ran away. With a dreadful yearning Nadya found herself thinking of true kindness in a man, true love, and wondered whether she would find both those things in Michael.

When he felt he knew her better, he said, "You know, you are much too delicate, too unbelievably white gold, to

be a Russian. You must be something out of a book, in a language that I haven't had time or opportunity to learn."

She smirked at him, the cameo clarity of her profile wrinkling ever so slightly. "And you impress me like a mediæval gentleman. I wish there were more of you! Now why should that embarrass you? Come, if you are going to dye yourself dark red, you must have sufficient cause; I offer myself to you as partner for this dance." She accepted his arm. "I can become very red myself. Princess Augustina says that I float and then bob up and down under the delusion that I dance. I'm sure she maligns me often."

There followed other dances with her, other bits of conversation that delighted and somewhat terrified him. Instead of the arranged fortnight Michael stayed nearly a month under Augustina's hospitable eaves, going to more balls and theaters than he had ever attended in his life, courting Nadya daily with shy ardor that left her sweetly humbled. When he begged her to marry him almost at the moment of his departure, she fingered the tips of her fan of painted silk and mother of pearl, brushed them absently against his clasped hands, and apparently unmoved asked him, "Augustina has told you all about me?" And to his sympathetic nod, "Yet you have courage? What a man! What a man to take a wife without a name and give her one much finer than most! Thank you, Michael. This is quite the kindest moment of my life." Her eyes were bright; he thought they were like a child's undecided whether to smile or cry; there was a sharpness in his heart now, a kind that had come in every happiness of his life when he had realized his love for Alexis most deeply, Feodor, and the Musty Mouse. Now Nadya. After Nadya it was hardly likely that a heart could feel much more. She was saying with brave honesty, "We have not so very much in common, Michael. You love your books. People mean less to you;

you can live without them. I cannot, Michael. I love life and people. My frivolous bones want crowded cities. Once I saw too much of farms! How do you know," brushing the fan gently across his fingers, "that we wouldn't hate one another after a time?"

"If you could love me, Nadya, I would give my life to make you happy. I would give you my life if you hated me. I can give you almost everything you want. I'll be glad to invite your friends to visit you whenever you wish. There is so much room in Alexis' house." She found her lashes wet at this wistfulness. "Somehow, I can't help thinking that you will even wish to teach the children on the farms. Some of the peasants have such bright babies, such strong beautiful babies as you would never see in Saint Petersburg. And I know you like to ride. There will be Arabs in the stables for you. Is there nothing at all, Nadya, that I can give you?"

Here was indeed the one man who would be truly kind to her. Here was the means of breaking the increasingly distasteful bond with Augustina. Nadya felt a sudden exhilarating premonition of new adventure, fresher contacts. Under her was the glorious winged body of an Arab steed and over her a magnificent eastern sky. There was rough sod and the Arab proudly bearing her through the rank and file of an adoring peasantry. They would adore her because she could understand their mute eagernesses. And Saint Petersburg could always be had. Paris again some day, Bremen, Berlin and Budapest.

"You are giving me everything now," she returned calmly, feeling a degree of shame that she could accept his generosity with such calm. "Michael, I love you a little now. It would be heresy not to love you soon as you deserve. I shall love you more, I know. Hearing this, do you still want to marry me, Michael?" At the admission of his rapt eyes her

fingers alighted on his hair, his cheek, like so many butterfly wings caressing him. "I must have a little time, my dear. And we must be married on your father's estates. Yes, I do wish that. Will you go home then, and wait for such a selfish bride?"

He had reached for her hands, holding them against his lips as though the world could end and he would never let them go.

"Oh, my dear! I didn't know you cared so much—my dear, dear Michael!"

Nadya had been glad of the fact she would not have to marry Dmitri but Augustina's open displeasure over the incident antagonized her still. The picture of Augustina, too astonished for words, gave her extraordinary pleasure though she said humbly enough, "Madam, I am going to marry your nephew. We ask your blessing. Michael is just outside the door."

Michael had come in at that, kissed his aunt's hand, believing her morbid acceptance of their betrothal was most natural in view of the prospect of losing Nadya's companionship.

"I can't tell you how glad I am that Nadya wishes to be married on Alexis' land," he confessed proudly. "I shall leave immediately to get things ready so that when you two arrive, there will be nothing to delay us. Forgive me, if you can, for taking her so far away to live."

His aunt drew down her mouth grimly. Naturally Nadya would see to it that the marriage would take place in the most dramatic manner possible and naturally she would flatter Michael into thinking she wanted to be married on the site of her future home. Augustina almost wished for the audacity to tell him that his prospective wife was perfectly aware that that journey was anathema to his aunt, that

Nadya was cheating her out of a splendid marriage feast in Leff's home. There was gratitude for you! And revenge. Augustina was wrathily perplexed the more she thought about it, looking at both of them, knowing that in summarily dismissing Dmitri's suit she had propelled Nadya into the more illustrious branch of her family. It was abominably queer that things happened so. And if Leff were alive, with that perverted humor that always exercised itself most on her misfortunes, he would chuckle for weeks and weeks over this turn of affairs. But she had herself to thank. She never should have gone riding in the country that day with Dmitri. This was exactly what she deserved for not having remained in her darkened home, mourning her Leff like a decent grief-stricken woman. Instead, she had had to go careening about the landscape in her carriage, picking up a girl no one knew anything about, spending plenty of time and money on her, and to what end? So that the girl could marry one of her dear Alexis' sons!

Augustina was seized with a severe attack of indigestion and had to be helped to bed.

XXII

Nadya sat embroidering in Augustina's garden. Sedately she drew the slim needle in and out and in again, uniting threads of silk to make a gaudy cabbage rose nature would have disdained to fashion. A finger was pricked, a low moan was made and at a man's deep amusement, she ran swiftly to the hedge.

"Black Brow!"

He gathered himself together, crawled out from beneath the shrub. "The closer one gets to earth," he observed, "the more frequently do fleas get in one's ears. A woman's nagging was never a more deplorable thing, nor more pernicious, rather." He refused to give her his hand, hiding it behind him. "They are very dirty and yours are very white. And I don't like your hair tied up over your ears like that. Do ladies wear their hair like that these days?"

"Oh, stop," she ordered in vexation. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Yes and no. Yes, because I cannot seem to help myself, and no, because you look like a doll and I am much too old to play with dolls. I might even suddenly decide to take you apart to see what makes you talk so nicely. But as I said to Martyn, 'We shall find her in one of two places—either Moscow or Saint Petersburg.' The Lizard was disinclined to give us any information at all. You did not appear to be in Moscow so we came here again. In a hurry, as usual. The Lizard is not so very well. Her stomach, it seems, has disappeared, and when one's stomach decides quietly to disappear on one, there is something to worry about!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. How is Martyn? Where is he? Wouldn't he come with you?"

"Martyn never changes. He is now in an inn, drinking himself into a venomous state, and he wouldn't come with me because he doesn't think you care to see him. One can't blame him. You left him nothing to pin a hope on."

Contrition spoke in her voice. "I must explain to him how it all happened. The Lizard was getting too much for me, anyway, and Princess Augustina held out such an opportunity. It would never happen twice to me. Would it, now?"

"Opportunities will always happen to you." The shrewd merriment in his eyes jibed her, and took in the ruby on her finger. "Yet I can't say that I blame you. Is that the Baron Michael's ring? It's really a good ring. Be careful that you don't lose it. Martyn and I brought you back some rings that time, but you were gone. They weren't very good rings; we were in such a rush. Marianna has to keep shining them."

"Michael! Where did you hear about Michael?"

He was injured. "You know perfectly well that I can get any information I want out of a bedbug. May I offer my congratulations, or is it just one of those things?"

"I am glad to receive congratulations," she retorted, flushing.

"Well, you said something once, a million years ago, about wanting millions of rubles so that you wouldn't have to think of the price of things. I hope the Baron Michael won't have you irritated with prices."

She ached to say meanly, "If you are going to keep on talking like that, I would much rather you went home." But she pleaded, "I know I deserve all your sarcasms. But I'm very fond of him."

"So? That's pleasant news. You were very fond, too, of Martyn and me, but you didn't think of marrying either of

us, did you? I believe you can still marry Martyn, but as for me, I'm safely out of your clutches. I wouldn't let you marry me for anything, I'm so put out with you. But I must say that you look very well. I do believe Saint Petersburg suits you. Tell me," leaning confidentially toward her ear, "does she make you go to church every week?"

"Augustina? Yes. And often twice and three times."

"How perfectly horrid," gravely.

"And for presents she gives me ikons."

"Atrocious, when I know you would rather have beads and a shiny pin. Or is it rubies you like now?"

"Emeralds," assuming her old scorn for they were friends again in spite of his lingering distrust. "Princess Augustina has a flair for them as you know by this time, perhaps. They keep me blind. But you must promise me not to touch them."

"Like the Lizard, I swear nothing, but for old-time's sake I shall try to put the glittery things out of my mind. It won't be very easy. I love glittery things. And who is that chubby maid—the one who gurgles when she talks? Swear you won't be hard on her; she told me where I could hide to wait for you. I paid her with three kisses but she was underpaid. It worries me. And supposing she betrayed me to the jewelled Augustina!" He whispered an address in her ear. "Will you meet us there tonight, Nadya? We shall wait till you come. If you have a last word with Martyn, it will make for kindlier memories."

"Surely. You know that."

"And will you try to look a little as you used to? No, that is impossible. You're much older. I see that now. Marianna is a hag compared to your youth. You've changed inside to match your ruby ring, haven't you?"

"I think I have."

"Yes," absently brushing the dirt from his arms, "but never mind. There's something very satisfying in good jewels,

like rubies and pearls. A topaz, now. A topaz is nothing. It reflects the sun. A ruby is a richer thing, like a vein of a man's heart."

To himself he said after taking affectionate leave of her, "And as for pearls, a lady has to have enough of them to see what they are and then they make a rope to hang her. There is no kindness in a pearl. But why should there be? There's no kindness in an oyster, either."

Black Brow waited at the door of the inn. Outside, the heaven that had been soft and bulbous after the fashion of a quilt of down became moody and sullen with the load of storm. Within, there was a scraping of fiddles and belabored harmonicas, dancing, a warm odor of holiday breads. Then he saw Martyn.

The Lizard's son was dancing with a wide-lipped snub-nosed little peasant whose feet were anything but clumsy. His face was dark. A lock of hair fell dankly over his forehead. Black Brow went to him when the mazurka ended.

"I want to talk to you, Martyn."

"Well, and what about?" fingering his belt leisurely but his knuckles had whitened.

"Nadya is really going to marry that Baron Michael so-and-so, or whatever his name is."

"Well, what does it matter?"

"She seems happy, Martyn. I think you should know that. Don't say anything to make her unhappy. Her life is her own, you know."

"I know that you imagine too many things," he said curtly, yet when a short hour later Nadya came, he greeted her in an exuberant mood and took her to another room. "A table!" he called loudly. "We must have a table. Here, you!" calling the inn-keeper's brother, a fellow with a protruding belly and a vicious lip who led them into an adjoining room evi-

dently much in demand for private felicitation, and left them a moment later with an expression intended to be droll. Nadya looked helplessly about her, wishing she had not come. She spoke with an effort. "It's like old times seeing you again like this."

"It isn't," Martyn replied with quiet bitterness. "We've travelled too far from each other. I wish you had not come. I've loved you so long and I find now it's no use."

She pressed her hand against her mouth. "Martyn, you must know that I loved you as a child would love you."

He saw the regret, dismay, in the line of her mouth. "I wish you had not come," he repeated stubbornly, wanting to see her tears, and when they came, wanting to see himself dead. Black Brow took his arm.

"Let's go back, Martyn. You have no aces left to play. We shouldn't have tried to see her."

But Martyn was kissing her cheek, the gold strands of her hair, her icy hands. It was his way of taking leave of her, his way of promising that never again would a man called the Lizard's son cross her shining path. For him she was now remote as the moon and he would treasure her like that.

"We had better go now." Black Brow was gentle, but his voice seemed to lift the roof. Tears salted his beard and he was unashamed. Martyn would wake up in a week or two and find that his friend had gone, no longer curious about the spot where he had stayed so long. The Lizard was nearly dead with the weight of her own memories. Martyn always would be the same, a man without capacity for tragedy. Soon Nadya would be swept within that circle where a woman wore her title like a pearl of great price. New living must begin for all of them.

They had left Nadya with her face drooping to the rough boards of the tavern table. Somewhere a god sat in his heaven, pondering, and soon he would manage to have

something else happen to a woman of Nadya's precious make. In the meantime she would go home and go to bed. Black Brow ceased his worrying, prodded his horse to fly before the furies of the storm.

> **"Naught I know of my returning**
> **So thy love I would be learning**
> **Answer thou my heart's last yearning**
> ***Be thou true to me."***

sang Martyn, and the wind caught up the words and threw them to the sky.

A handsome youth, that Martyn, Black Brow thought. Tallest of the band. A face rarely given to sorrow. A slow smile like the growing illumination of candles in a church, only there was nothing holy about Martyn.

How could there be, in the offspring of a lizard?

XXIII

Beneath a hushed sky the Lizard lay between her crumpled quilts. She was very withered, very ancient, but in her still burned the fierce unwinking fire of a shooting star before it hurls itself from space. Martyn as a son was long since dead to her and of him she thought distortedly.

When Nadya was almost forgotten in the camp he had returned with Black Brow, their secret adventurings most profitable, their pockets filled with presents for her. He had come at night and found none awake to tell him of his loss. Despite her angry dissentings he drew the Lizard into the edge of the fire's light, and they had looked at one another hatefully. Her leathered skin stretched over a nasty smile, her eyes hid behind their vicious lids.

"You wanted to get rid of her, didn't you?" Martyn seemed strangely calm at her denials.

"Well, she wasn't for you, that one. Didn't she tell us, time and time again, what it was she wanted? Nothing you could give her, was there?"

He had taken her face in his hands then until that nearness became abhorrent to him.

"You old fool, you knew I loved the girl! I really loved her."

Her protestations lost themselves in the crackle of the fire, and in shadows they stooped there, two mortal enemies for the duration of their lives.

Now, wherever Martyn was, he would return to find she had eluded his last gayeties, perhaps his slight sorrow. Too late, too late for that. Better his mocking laughter than a false grief born at death.

The Lizard stretched a hand to freedom from the quilted weights above her breast. On a finger she could scarcely lift a ring of emeralds clung and her body seemed warmer at their sight. Her life had been a tawdry thing, a soiled thing, with only loves to brighten it, but now these jewels calmed her pity. She would fall asleep, so, with them close to her throat.

Dimly, she thought it possible that the Princess Augustina who swam in emeralds would understand.

XXIV

Many days had passed from the one of Augustina's indisposition and she still kept to her bed. To Nadya's now frantic administerings she said dismally, "Go ahead. Go get ready and go to your Michael and marry him without me. I can't get out of my bed and walk across the floor to say nothing of driving clear across the country for days. It would be suicide, my child. You had better plan to go without me. I shall arrange about your dowry today."

At last there was a better understanding between them. Nadya finished packing her trunks while Augustina's chagrin gradually became tempered with admiration. She even permitted her heart to feel that once Nadya produced a son and named him "Leff," she could forgive her this plotting and treachery. At that, a daughter named Augustina would not be wholly undesirable. She hinted as much and was assuaged when Nadya admitted cunningly having considered both aspects of the case. In a few days all the problems of transportation and dowry were attended to, all Nadya's boxes of clothing and gifts fitted into the carriage, all farewells in the city said, and she took lugubrious parting from Augustina who sat up in bed, her cap secluding one eye utterly, tears running down her cheeks.

When Nadya had gone in a flurry of stiff silks and cloaks, veils, and many mixed protestations of gratitude and devotion, when the house had ceased to echo the good wishes of her servants for Nadya's married life, Augustina still sat all in a muddle of fine linen sheets and Persian-patterned quilts, amid convictions that as a fairy god-mother, she had

displayed more than a few earthworm rings. There was a recognizable beat of sadness in her heart, a regret that she had not been always truly kind as she intended.

Augustina plucked at her nose. Her cap fell off.

"What," she asked of her four walls in surprised dejection, "whatever shall I do with myself now?"

XXV

The marriage took place in a small church between Michael's estate and that of a neighboring baron, and afterward all the guests repaired to Michael's house to eat and drink and dance, doing anything they pleased that day. Old Appa who mothered Nadya on sight, hurried up and down stairs, waiting on her while Igor gave refreshment to the priest, profaning the sacred occasion with her irreligious remarks.

"Marriages were first thought of by the devil," was the gist of some of them uttered in the privacy of her mistress' bedroom. "God never meant a man and a woman to get into such a sweat of fright before living together. *Now* what are you crying about?"

Nadya dried her eyes. The woman was a satisfying old virago and understood her. "I don't know," she admitted. "I feel as though I had been married an eternity instead of an hour. Is that the way a bride is supposed to feel, Appa?"

"How should I know? Am I not a virgin, such as I am?" At that, both of them snickered and wept again. "And wouldn't I be a sight for a handsome man's eyes at any time? But never mind. Brides all weep. It's an old custom. And husbands weep best when they are slightly in their cups. That's another habit of impending matrimony. You see now, don't you, that it's a silly business whichever way you look at it? For a while I really thought you were going to run away and I was getting ready to run right after you."

"I nearly did." Nadya's eyes became dark. So easily had this wedding been brought about, the solution to a small

revolt again Augustina and the pattern of her ways, and what would it bring of ease except to her body? The ruby ring that Michael had given her the day of his proposal now shone like the dull red thing her own heart must be, a deeper fire far within where no one could see. She had said to him, "As long as I have this ruby I shall respect your chivalry. It isn't every man who wants a wife who waits to love him." She had never expected then to lose his gift but Michael answered seriously, "Am I to understand that when you lose it, you lose your respect for me? Sometimes I find it difficult to understand just what you mean. Don't lose it, then, I beg of you!" In the face of his sincerity her facetiousness was shamed.

Appa brought lotions for her hands, happy now that Alexis' house which had been a house of men was to be governed by a woman. She thoroughly approved of small-boned women as the better halves of large bearded men. Her mistress Nadya was beautiful and she had no apparent intention of treating her like a serf; moreover she had a sense of humor which, as Appa informed her brother, was a finer gift than her straight nose and flawless skin. She amended, however, "But you mark my words, when a woman has all those things, a perfect mouth and sweet manners, too—then even God must have put them together for mischief. There's poison in too many gifts."

"There's poison in too many speculations," Igor retorted wearily. He had poured and carried wines and beers for endless hours, not being under obligation to work so hard, to be sure, but because, except for young Peter, the other servants under him were knaves and slow wretches, lazy louts and jackanapes, and he told them this opinion frequently as some guest was moved to ask twice for a helping of one drink or some particular kind of food not on the tables. He was genuinely pleased that his master was mar-

ried, as to him an unmarried man of Michael's worth and great estates offered something to worry about. But now that he was married there would be nothing to worry Igor further, except, perhaps, Michael's children. And they wouldn't worry him necessarily unless they turned out to be the disturbing mischievous kind that Michael and his brother were in their youth. But people got over those things if they lived long enough.

Igor found that he had spilled alcoholic liquids on his holiday smock and was mortified, the more when Appa told him he never had learned to take care of his best clothes and in all probability never would. Thereupon she rushed between the pantries for a cloth to dry him with and a pitcher of beer to cheer his vitals. Young Peter, whom Nadya declared to be no bigger than a bug and twice as swift, scurried to the stove with a straight-end poker. That he thrust into the stove coals with one hand, with the other sticking more cloves into a simmering ham shank, running in a moment to Igor's beer and swirling the red glowing bar in it, throwing to the old man's eager nose an aroma more nutty and delicious than any ever brewed by pageboy to the gods. Old Appa hovered over her Igor like a mothering hen, tasting of the beer herself and pronouncing it worthy of twenty brothers.

"There's no fool like an old one getting sentimental," she scolded. "Anyone would think that you thought you were a bride yourself! What? Must you also weep?"

At twilight of Nadya's marriage day the men gathered to sing ancient folk-songs, and hymns of duties for the beloved. The new mistress of Alexis' estates listened to the unforgettable music doubly wonderful with its aching minor refrains. She was deeply roused by the mellow light on the costumes of all these who were her friends, and by the

shadows on the old house that had once harbored an assassination of a ruler of the Russian empire. This was her home, mysterious, shadowed. Here she had opened a new book of life in which she and Michael were to cut new leaves ready now for the imprint of fresh affections. This was at last her home.

Michael kept his promises to Nadya, filling the house with guests for her whenever she wished them. At those times that his company would not be missed for an hour he sat in his library, reading his beloved books. Several times a week he made his rounds among his friends the barons, treating them and their peasants for rheumatism and other common ills, extracting their bad teeth, delivering their women of children and listening to cheerful gossip.

For seven months after her marriage Nadya was well content, riding mornings, and spending afternoons in her gardens. The peasants working his lands adored her and, sooner than Michael would have believed, she was teaching some of them and their more eager children to read and write. Their humble affection and real regard touched her more than she would admit, for not so long ago in the past had she herself sat thus at Augustina's feet, their humbleness hers then, though not their utter ignorance. When she learned of the approaching birthday of the twin retainers, nothing must do but festivities in their honor, to which she would invite neighboring barons, their families and equally faithful servants. Nadya had spent a week in preparation for the great event before it occurred to her that Appa had never revealed her exact age.

"How old are you now, you and Igor?" she asked.

Appa did not appear to be in a confiding mood. "Old enough to know better than count our birthdays," she grumbled. "It will be more fun to count yours. Anyway,

the science of numbers is a stupid one for a woman growing old," holding up her hands. "Do you see them? Well, once there was a time when I would look at them myself and say, 'What an atrocious number of warts you have!' But now they mean no more to me than the years over my head. In fact, strange as it may seem, I have become quite attached to my warts." She bustled about her kitchens, her garrulousness having ceased as suddenly as it began, peering into this barrel for flour, and into that one to be sure there would be enough syrups for all the toothsome things she intended making. She would have to prod young Peter once or twice; he was an excellent young fellow but for his pernicious habit of forgetting to keep her bowls of potato yeast well-covered. And of course, he had not thought to bring up more potatoes from the cellar bins.

"Come out of that barrel, you ponderous old ostrich," Nadya teased, "and answer me in a reasonable length of time. What do you want for presents, you and Igor? Or do you find it difficult to think that far ahead?"

"Peace," Appa mumbled, rubbing scrubby shoots from the few shrunken potatoes left in her precious barrel. "All I want is peace. But do I get it? Instead my mistress comes down and hounds me in my own kitchens when I look for a decent potato for her lunch. Young Peter is a nincompoop."

"I take it you wish potatoes for your gift? Very well. One or two bushels, Appa? Do you suppose Igor has some idea of potatoes or onions, say, on his mind, too? Neither of you has a soul above vegetables, apparently."

Appa brandished one in assumed wrath. "Who said I wanted this atrocious vegetable for a gift? Who in her right mind wants any gift of vegetables like potatoes that warp the minute one looks in an opposite direction? Not I. What I really would appreciate is a decent petticoat if not two of them. It's getting so I don't enjoy myself at my Sunday

prayers. If I find I must kneel, I find also that the floor goes through my poor old knees. If I see it's going to be a question of whether petticoats or prayers have to be given up, I'll give up my prayers. In this day and age no woman of my size and reputation can do without petticoats."

Nadya enjoyed goading her. "I see you are no good Christian, demanding new petticoats before you can think of your prayers."

"I wasn't demanding them. You offered me presents and I gave myself away to you. And anyway, prayers take on character when one feels respectable."

"How many petticoats will it take to improve the quality of your praying?"

"One will help my knees and two will do that and encourage my spirit. Strange, isn't it, how one runs out of everything at once—potatoes, petticoats and prayers? I'll have to have new linens down here, too. You know though, it's a funny thing about praying. You pray and pray for about seventy years and suddenly it occurs to you that God isn't listening, not because He doesn't believe you but because there's stupidity in so much goodness. Once I tried saying my prayers backward to surprise Him but I found myself getting terribly involved and had to give it up. I've scarcely said them since. I only kneel. At any rate, I am convinced that I'm going to heaven. Why shouldn't I be? Haven't I led a blameless life? That's more than I can say for anyone else I happen to know! Now, Mistress, will you do me the goodness to get up from my beet barrel? You've known perfectly well for the last five minutes that I've been looking for beets to make you a soup!"

Nadya obligingly left the kitchens to ask a few favors of Michael who in turn was equally obliging after receiving a reasonable number of kisses.

Five days from the moment of the last kiss Feodor arrived.

XXVI

He rode through the yards and dismounted with a flourish. Young Peter took the reins and on being given the visitor's name, ran to Igor with the news. In turn the hysterical old man stumbled to Michael who hastened to the door. The brothers embraced, Michael with tears in his eyes, Feodor with a loud, "Michael, you old sea lion! With a beard to do justice to Neptune's grandfather! I've brought you the money that you borrowed for me five thousand years ago. Remember?"

Michael remembered, his arms about him, and brought him into the house, remembered again the gap of years.

"Alexis died, you know."

"Yes, I know."

Michael did not want to ask him how he knew; memory of Alexis' broken heart was still too poignant for speech. He watched with glad eyes the brother who stood so straight in that ancient baronial hall, his stalwart body imposing and youthfully brilliant in its full Cossack regalia. Feodor's face was bronzed, his nose a bit more to remind him of an eagle than he had remembered. There was a light misting of gray over his temples, extraordinary for his years, but it might have been the dust blown there by the strong currents met with in his flight. To Igor's joy Feodor gave a brief handshake and, "How have you been?"

"Quite well, considering . . . and Appa, too, is as well."

"Oh, yes, of course—Appa."

Igor slunk out of the room. Michael was unable to put his air of frustration from his mind. Feodor should not have for-

gotten how like eager children these old servants were. He would speak to him later about it.

To Nadya attempting to gain courage from her pacing in the rooms above, it seemed impossible that that rich voice belonged to Feodor who had died in all but her dreams long ago, impossible to think that she must go down soon and give her hand to him, look into the fires of someone who had devastated her long ago with one glance. At the head of the stairs she waited again, hoping the face she had carried in her memory had changed beyond recognition, and beyond her need of loving it. Nothing but that could save her.

Then she saw him, saw but new glory in the change, for the eagle's feather on his upper lip was still there, a black feather, a carefree thing and dashing.

Nadya went to Feodor, her hand trembling beneath the laces of her satin cuff, wondering whether her eyes lied as she had hoped they would, whether this man formally greeting her as a new brother should, really thought they were meeting for the first time. He had kissed her hand and her cheek with the gallantry permissible to the occasion but his eyes were those of a stranger.

"I never should have believed," he said casually, "that Michael could have ensnared a lovely thing like you. It must have been at night,"—now his eyes were laughing, revealing, daring her to remember his arms had carried her at night—"it must have been at night surely, and he must have picked you up and carried you to his trap. That is the only way one really catches such a woman!"

"No," she returned with a touch of his own manner, regardless of the gladness, the terror beating in her throat. "It was at night but in a balcony. A most respectable balcony, belonging to your aunt Augustina in fact. Michael

said I was white gold, and being a vain woman, the phrase caught me immediately. It was one very respectable thing I had never heard before. Naturally, I wanted to live where I could hear it often." Nadya laughed, dropping a mystic veil between them. Feodor must not be permitted to see through that. Her husband's love must be respected. Above all things burning in her mind she must be faithful to that love. Feodor turned to Michael, aware that she had shut him out.

"You've learned to talk to women, Michael, haven't you? I had no idea you had that amount of poetry in you."

"Neither had I, but even a sea lion may have his one poetic moment looking at a pretty woman."

"Now that we have paid nearly maudlin tribute to the face God gave me," Nadya chided, "we must tell you, Feodor, that you are just in time for a most delightful birthday party. Igor and Appa will be forced by us to admit their age and cook refreshments for two hundred in the bargain. That picturesque apparel you have on will dress the gathering wonderfully. May I ask how long you have been a Cossack?"

"Since it was written a thousand years before my birth, Madam."

"Hm. Blaming it on the stars, are you?"

As he joined in her malicious laughter Michael said proudly, "He's really done his best riding from the age of thirteen. Although he's always sat a horse like part of the horse's hide."

"An unlucky number, thirteen, they say," she warned, "but you wear your numbers well. Are you hungry, new brother?"

"Famished, new sister. Roaring for sustenance."

"Michael, please entertain the starving darling while I

track Appa and some food for him immediately. Feodor," raising her brows, "what do you wish to drink—wines, beer, or the strongest waters that we have?"

"I lead from strength to weakness always. Show me all of them, if you will." His face admitted that her mien was surprising. She was a sly creature, a wise creature, but to him she would have to tell the truth. He would wait.

Nadya derided him sweetly as she left the hall, though to say his name was incense, gall and wormwood to her lips.

"Feodor! What a handsome tank you are! And as God is my witness, tanks of mixed content have been known before this to make trouble!"

By nightfall Feodor had drunk himself into the state of ill-tempered loquacity that Michael remembered so keenly.

"Better not drink any more for a few hours," he suggested. "I want to talk over the division of the estate with you. Alexis would not want his lands to be sold to strangers. Shall I give you your share in money and our mother's jewelry or will you take part of the property?"

"The first two, naturally. You don't suppose I rode such a distance to spend the rest of my days on some acres of stubble, rye and barley, do you? No. This is the time to gild my palms. I must not wait until they are closed in death. But there is no hurry. Tomorrow can take care of it. I think talking to Nadya or of her is infinitely preferable."

"Quite." Michael hoped that Feodor would want to go to bed, instead of continuing to sit there, boasting, and bringing up memories of their school days.

"A woman like that must have had her pick of men. Michael, I'll wager that even you were amazed when she married you. Amazed and somewhat grateful?"

"She has not regretted it."

"There, there. Don't be incensed. A fond brother must have his little marital joke. How long have you been married?" adding when Michael told him, "I see. Not long enough for any little Michaels to be playing about."

"Really, Feodor!"

"Forgive me."

Nadya entered, uncontrollably angry. Men were beasts when drunk. She hated Feodor then, holding him with eyes suddenly antagonistic, coldly venomous.

"Your Arab has kicked Peter! The poor boy was only trying to take care of him. If you like horses absolutely wild then please do us the courtesy of attending to their wants yourself. Peter, come in here!"

Followed by the worried Igor, young Peter stepped hesitatingly into the room. He cringed from pain even at Michael's experienced hands.

"Well, you young dog," Feodor said furiously, "how many times have I told you in the last few hours to let him alone? But no, you must do this for him, and that. If he did kick you in the belly, it serves you right. Next time I hope he kicks you in that stupid lump of mush you call your head!"

"Feodor!" Nadya cried out. "You've put off feeding your Arab for hours. Peter was only trying to do the right thing and now you can talk like that! Michael told me once how much you loved horses. If today is an example of the way you love them, I don't want to see any more of it. This is Michael's house, and mine," looking defiantly at him, "and you are here only as our guest. We will not permit any further language on the order of the last."

Feodor was stung to a sullen, "Peasants are like donkeys. They need to be kicked."

"Peter, go lie down. It's the best thing to do now." Then Michael turned on his brother. "I don't mind confessing

I had hoped for years that you would change. I see now it has been a stupid hope. You don't want to change. You are always going to like making people hate you, particularly the poor souls like young Peter who haven't an opportunity in the world to reply to you. I can't live long enough to make him forget what you have just done to him!"

Feodor threw himself into a chair. "If you are trying to tell me that I don't consider peasants as people, you're quite right."

"You have never considered anyone worth your slightest thought. Unfortunately, your feeling about peasants is held by a great number of equal fools. It must be the saddest thing in God's sight."

"Well, that's been the state of affairs for centuries," flippantly, "so He may have reconciled Himself long ago."

"That remark is not the first sacrilege you've committed. I can think of none more abominable. I'm ashamed for you, but ashamed more for the way you have hurt poor old Appa and Igor with your indifference. They have never earned a thing like that from you. Excuse us now, if you will. Nadya and I would rather see you tomorrow in another mood. Good night, Feodor. God be with you."

Standing at the door his brother had closed firmly, Feodor murmured, "So? God be with me, indeed. I know it's the customary thing to say in parting but I believe He had better remain with you who seem to know Him so much more intimately!"

Old Appa and Igor had had their birthday and did not regret the passing of that celebration. What was a double birthday in a world full of trouble and work? But the work was of their own making and knowing it, they accepted their many presents with excellent humor, and in comparing them they wondered ingenuously how much the numberless things

could have cost. Appa ran about the yards at one time with a pair of new petticoats over an arm and a panful of sweet apples in the other, and attempted twice to take a bite out of a red petticoat; pure absent-mindedness it was, she explained, and the beginning of what promised to be a truly calamitous old age.

She and her twin and young Peter had attended to the wants of people who had surged through all the rooms of Michael's house. Up one floor and down another they scattered, singing, and forming into challenging groups of dancers. Pleading weariness, Nadya gently refused to dance but she tirelessly supervised the serving of refreshments to her guests and avoided conversation with Feodor who had become queerly ingratiating. He took great pleasure in staying at her heels and removing emptied glasses from her tray whether or not she wished his service. Then, wasting no time he would hurry back to her with insinuating humility for further orders from her tightened lips. Hating herself for her weakness and knowing that Feodor was well aware of what he had said at the time, yet she found herself making excuses for his cruel outbreak against young Peter.

Now Michael was waiting in his library for the appointment with Feodor to settle the question of their inheritance. The guests had left in a commotion of good cheer and even better wishes for everyone's health and continued happiness, particularly Feodor's as he was leaving on the morrow, too early to receive their farewells then. All of Nadya's servants but Igor immediately tumbled over one another to reach their straw mattresses. She put out all the gleaming candles and all but one of the lamps, and walked through the sweet stillness of her house to that remaining light. Feodor rose from a chair beside it.

Nadya stood at the foot of the staircase. She was a golden flower in her gown of precious silks that seemed to have

gathered all the sunlight in the world to their folds. It could have stood alone with the weight of its own richness, its two hundred little ribboned bows, its exquisite ivory laces. In that Feodor saw her as a lovely picture that he wanted to hold and caress.

"Of course," he wheedled, "if you want to play the distant relative, that is your privilege, but surely we know one another too well for that! If you have any of the softer feelings in your womanly breast, you will kiss me 'goodnight' like a sweet sister, indeed. . . . *I have waited so long for your kiss.*"

He had come up to her and leaned against the post, his voice holding promises to which she could not willingly close her ears. A wavering ray of light she stood until his arms embraced her, and trembled once so that it seemed to her he must have heard the breaking as of thunder of old faiths, old resolves to be worthy of his brother named Michael.

Their lips met. A flame ran though them both and made them blind.

"It is like this, sweet," his kiss said, "that I would have held you years ago."

"If you had," her own confessed, "I would not be wearing a lady's gown today. You know I would scarcely be mistress of all these lands."

Shame stained her throat for that she must some day bear Michael's child. She looked up the stairs where she must go for such endless distances from Feodor.

"God be with you," she said like one who moved sightlessly, her heart aching with the ceaseless agony of mutilated bone for that she must always love him. Countless years she had been waiting for her precious love, and in his kiss she thought she had found it at last, yet realized on the instant her waiting had been betrayed. Feodor would kiss her with his mouth but never with true worship of his

heart. There had been demon laughter in the ending pressure of his lips, the more satanic for its quietude. In him there was everything for glory and nothing grew but strange defeat. She loved him, hating him fiercely, helplessly, for that acid alchemy of spirit that made him what he was. No one would ever know him, all must love him, all must hate him and in their flashing momentary hate recognize the catastrophe of his being.

"Till we meet again," she whispered, and he said not a word until she had almost left his vision. Then a tempestuous phrase reached her, perhaps but an echo in her memory of words written beneath a portrait of her painted a long time in the past:

"Some day soon I shall kiss you of your own free will, you little glass replica of a woman, and you will rather die than have it end."

XXVII

Feodor sought out Michael who requested the patient but exhausted Igor to give them a new supply of wine and then he began looking through the books of the estate's expense. Once he stopped to glance out of the window.

"A wonderful night," he remarked quietly.

"Black as hell," grunted Feodor, sinking into a chair.

"Black as velvet and not a solitary star nor the faintest glimmer of a moon. A night for beautiful things. Or rare terrible things."

"A night for love or combat, you mean! Not that it would do much good in combat—a man couldn't see his way before him. It is just as though all the saints in heaven have fallen forever."

"Perhaps they have." Michael's mouth twisted cruelly.

"What the devil is that you say?"

"I said that perhaps they *have* fallen. There are times when one loses faith in things of heaven. Or rather one realizes that things of heaven are fashioned wholly in one's mind." Michael held a hand wearily against his head. Once again he felt a great desolation, more sweeping now than when he had seen Nadya in Feodor's arms. He had gone to the landing to look for Feodor and had seen their kiss. Afterward Nadya came blindly up the stairs and blinder still, Michael returned to his books. Strange death had possessed his hands and heart and he went to his knees.

"Well, I never believed in things of heaven," Feodor was saying. "In this world nothing counts but strength, believe it or not. Strength and swiftness," stretching powerful legs

before him. "But that doesn't interest me now. Where is that old goat with the wine?" He brightened when Igor entered. "Marking time as ever, aren't you, Igor? At least the years haven't slowed your footsteps any more, have they?"

The old man kept his peace, and filled the glasses, but his tired old lids blinked weakly, keeping back shameful tears. It was for this, he reflected piteously, it was for this moment he had served Alexis' sons. After the adoring years of his life spent in caring for them, and praying for them, one of them now talked to him like this. Perhaps when he was dead God might explain to his spirit why it was that in life adoration and prayer earned only a measure of revilement. There might have to be a great amount of explaining to heal the scars left by Feodor. Igor wondered if God would feel those countless scars worthy of His trouble.

"That will be all for a while, thank you, Igor," Michael dismissed him gently. As he turned gratefully to leave the room, Igor was tripped by Feodor grinning in clownish humor. Thin gnarled hands working at his sides, he stumbled out of the room, and hoped he was dreaming Feodor's shouted, "Clumsy old goat! Watch your hoofs, why don't you?"

Michael stared at his brother with grim eyes, asking with difficulty, "Feodor, I wonder that you have never married? Marriage might have exerted a most beneficial effect on your nature!"

"I doubt it. But I've had all the women I wanted, if that is what you are thinking of. Just lately there was a pretty red-haired little peasant serving the monks in a place we took a fancy to. The countryside was scandalized to learn that even monks have a liking for red-headed girls to wait on them. The good people were mortified to learn that religion and young females may go together! However, I

had her first and then I gave her to my men . . . they expect that. What makes you look so terrified? Don't be so concerned, Michael! I assure you it was no more than the little red-head expected also! . . . And you should have seen the face of old Brother Boris—God!—it certainly was a sight to tickle a lover's ribs. We tied him up and left him to think over his sparse life. . . . Oh, we didn't hurt him. Our tribe roams free but we never hurt anyone. Our men must have adventure. It's in the blood. Like mine, you see."

"I see."

"Oh, hmmm." Feodor swirled the contents of his glass. "It's the devil's own exciting life. I must fly back to it. Things are always happening. The unexpected ones are best. . . . Can't we have more of this wine? It appeals to me. It goes down like milk and then starts kicking you in the brain. Really, I am only just now beginning to feel like myself! And as I go so very early in the morning—unless Nadya adds her pleadings to your own—why, we may just as well make a night out of it together. Whether you like it or not, we are blood brothers, and there's nothing better than a heady drink to make a parting nearly affectionate!"

"Naturally, you may have all you wish this last evening. I realize you will never learn wisdom in your drinking. I've released Igor so I shall have to get more myself. Excuse me, if you will, please." Michael went to the door. There was an unaccustomed exhaustion in his body, and he wished poignantly that Feodor had never returned. It would have been kinder to remember him as he was in boyhood. From now on all thoughts of him would have to be of Feodor drunk, mean, boasting, of Feodor harsh as a winter's wind, Feodor untempered by any love. There was no love in fire and Feodor was a flame burning to incomprehensible ash. Michael had not felt tears in his eyes until he felt the sud-

den rush of them through his beard. Feodor, Feodor. A name for grief and tears.

"I suppose," Feodor was grumbling, "that you are still holding to the family custom of burying the precious stuff in the cellar."

"Centuries have proved it the best place."

"You're something of a century plant yourself, Michael. Did you know that? Come to think of it, the cellar is one more thing I have against that old death-mask. Do you remember once I tried to get into it on the north side? Appa had told me lurid tales of its history—and Igor caught me. I was whipped for it afterward. And then another time when you were with me. You weren't favored with a similar whipping, if I remember correctly. The old snail!"

"Good God, Feodor, are you still holding that against poor old Igor?"

"That, and other things."

"Look here," sharply, "just think of the fact that if he hadn't known you were down there the first time, you would not be sitting here now!"

"Indeed?"

"A good trap never opens its jaws once it has been sprung." Michael took a candle from a wall bracket and opened the door.

"Wait. I think I'll go with you. It shall never be said on my tombstone that I failed always to see the deepest cellar of the house I was born in."

"Better not. There is too little light and too many uneven places. You might miss a step. And you will be much more comfortable here."

"Who wants comfort? Not I. I want to see our cellar, I tell you. Yours and mine—the efficient family trap."

"Wait!" Michael warned hotly. "Take my advice for once in your life. You don't know that dungeon as well as I do.

One misstep and you would never take another! What's more, it's damnably damp, as you should remember. Stay here."

"Nonsense. I'll keep you company. There are some who say that one Feodor is fine company just as he is by the grace of heaven. And there are more to maintain there is none better than that same Feodor when he has four quarts of good red wine in his belly. Let's go down, then."

"I'll have to call Igor again. He must know where the keys are; I've entirely forgotten about them. It's a pity to disturb him."

When the old servant appeared, more a shadow than a man, Feodor called largely, "The keys, Aged Pantaloon! The keys to the cellar for which—more than once!—I've had to thank you for a beating."

Silently, awkwardly, still trembling from his abused affection, Igor took them from his belt and gave them to his master. Feodor started down the stairs.

"Forgive him, if you can, Igor. He goes soon," Michael said sympathetically, and placed an arm about the drooping old shoulders. "The wine may have dulled his appetite and breakfast will have to be delayed a little." After another comforting pressure, he followed Feodor.

Igor remained at the library threshold, staring bleakly after him.

"Ugh. How dark it is down here. I'd really forgotten. Let me take your candle, Michael, will you?"

"I told you not to hurry. You see now that it's dangerous. Don't move. I'll be with you in a moment."

Their two figures merged into a large shadow at the foot of the moldering staircase. Feodor looked up the midnight stretch of stairs with strange terror.

"A damnable place, Michael. I never was in here at night,

however. If I had been, just once, I think the place wouldn't have held another particle of fascination for me! Are you sure that that ghastly door up there won't close suddenly and lock us in?" His forced laughter made a chill sound against the stones around them while Michael pondered the choice of a key. "Hurry, will you? This place strikes fever to my soul. . . . That good Brother Boris would have it that I have a soul, although I am not so sure." Experimenting with the bolt on a mysterious door near him, his fingers recoiled swiftly. "Lord God! *Mold!*"

"Naturally. Well, I've found the right key," said Michael quietly. "It wouldn't do to pick the wrong one."

The key grated in an old lock. A door swung out from a cavern of blackness. Feodor sprang back from the gloom conjured before him, and laughed shortly to cover his cowardice.

"Heaven, what a place! Our dear ancestors had imagination—a more interesting quality than pity. But what about this other door here. It looks more—"

"Keep away from that cell, Feodor! The old wines are here!"

"Old wines or old bones," Feodor muttered, unheeding, "are of equal importance here." Again vicious, he rapped out, "What wouldn't I give to stick my enemies in here! That old death-mask, for example!"

"Igor?" Michael succumbed to fury. "You ungrateful fool! Do you mean that?"

"Surely," thrusting his head with dreadful fascination into the recesses of the forbidden cell. "It would be a beautiful joke on the doddering reptile. Or stick you in here and take Nadya to a fairy country!"

Michael's head swam with a hatred that shook his body. Feodor was capable of any treachery. He had proved that before this night and now he was willing to break a poor old

man who loved him. It was unthinkable, this thing, unthinkable that whenever Feodor chose to be a beast, there was no one who dared to cage him, warn him, punish him as he deserved.

As though he had but on the moment thought of them, Feodor repeated his last words, drunkenly.

"Nadya!" Michael cried out. "Her name was not made for your lips, Feodor!"

"But her lips were made for mine. And I have kissed them. In a way that you would never think of!"

"Never! Oh, never!" But his heart wept, "God forgive her. I saw them. *She is my death.* Nadya, Nadya, come back to me! I love you so, I love you so!"

"And her lips were very sweet."

"I will not forgive you that!" Michael struck him across the mouth.

"Her lips were very sweet!"

"May yours be damned forever!" Sobbing, and with a leopard thrust, Michael closed the massive door upon his brother and bolted it securely, beating on the solid wood with frenzied hands. "Dare to tell that to me now! Dare to laugh like that again!"

"Let me out! I'll break your head for this, you fool! What a devilish joke! I tell you I didn't mean—"

"I know how much you mean!"

"You let me out of this! I'll kill you!"

"Then you had better stay."

"These walls . . . oh, God, God! . . . my *hands!*"

"Yes, those spikes. They're rusted with older blood than yours! . . . Didn't I tell you not to come down here? Didn't I beg you to hold your tongue? You locked me in one of those once! Do you remember, Feodor? Do you remember? And now I'm the one to tell you, 'When you have taken the measurements, I'll let you out!' "

"You beast!"

"I am your brother!"

"Let me out! I shall go mad!"

"That's your concern. It will be morning soon. There's no provision where you are for standing. Perhaps you can do your thinking, sitting up. God be with you until I let you out."

"God *damn* you!"

With stricken heart, trembling, Michael ascended the stairs.

"May God—" The rest of Feodor's imprecation was lost in the sick sound of a drooling agonized mouth. With torn hands he was still beating against the spiked walls.

At the head of the staircase Michael paused, holding the candle high so that his face was crucified beneath the light.

"He probably will," he said.

XXVIII

Feodor was mad before he died.

His nature that was capable of the torture of innocent men and the rape of women had yielded to the hell of its own imaginings. In the morning when they had wanted to release him, Michael and Igor found him, beating his head against the walls, screaming, bleeding to death. As once he had struck his head against the shelves in Michael's student room so he must have thrown himself against the dread spikes, hour upon hour, in ceaseless agony of bent body and tortured mind.

Shaking with an unbearable self-crucifixion, Michael looked for Nadya after Feodor died in his arms. She was plainly unbelieving until he broke down and then, cursing him as he wept, she paced the floor, in such devastating impotent grief that Michael could not bear to look upon her. She had walked in her rooms half of that preceding night. Her heart had been heavy and she stopped twice at Michael's threshold to beg his forgiveness for her moment of disloyalty. Once she went within his rooms to find he was not in any one of them. Frightened, despite her harassed conscience, she had returned swiftly to her bed, to dream strange unhappy dreams.

"Oh, the madness of it!" she cried above Michael's crumpled body. "The utter madness of subjecting anyone to such a punishment. Oh, you fool, you damnable fool!" (Oh, Feodor, Feodor!)

Deeper furies stirred her, unforgettably cruel accusations some of them were, until she, too, fell into exhausting tears.

Hers had been a bitter love, unrequited, unrelenting, a phantom deep within it. Now Feodor was dead.

She wept turbulently, her frustrations storming against the bleak rock of his own great despair. They went down at last in savage defeat.

At high noon, her daughter, Marta, was born.

Nadya bent her head weakly.

"She is not beautiful," she said. "She looks what she is, a child of storm."

BOOK SIX

CHILD OF STORM

XXIX

Augustina had read Nadya's latest letter to Dmitri. "Now what do you make of that?" she asked. "Every year she has written me on my birthday and on Christmas and Easter. In between those times I have not heard a word from her. And now this comes. Why should she suddenly decide I must see this child of hers? Any child that's been brought up to say exactly what she thinks, as she has been, according to Michael's intimations, is probably a terror. And I haven't quite forgiven Nadya. You know, Dmitri, she promised me that she would name a daughter for me!"

"After all, you must admit that Augustina is too important a name to attach to a baby." He spoke indifferently as he tapped a cigarette against the palm of his hand.

Dmitri was not yet a general and he had lost several teeth. His hair, too, was not as abundant and sleek as it had been a few years earlier. Being a gentleman with an attachment for the romantic things in life, he found none of his comparatively recent deficiencies bearable. And in his travels throughout the whole of Russia, Augustina had been proved a guardian of poor judgment, for nowhere was it possible to find a young woman at all comparable to the Nadya he had so foolishly given up. Forgetting his own part in the matter, he chose to hold it against his aunt, and was inclined to believe that Nadya had married Michael because of the impulses of a thwarted heart. And if Nadya had borne a son, she would have done the gracious thing and named him for her first beloved. So to every pretty woman that he met Dmitri laid a siege of compliments and bore a sad cynicism

within his very ardor. Except for sweet memories of the inimitable Nadya be might have wedded any one of these pretty creatures and immersed himself in staid if holy matrimony.

"Augustina's too long a name for a little baby," he said bitterly, wishing he could add, "I think it's a hideous name."

She had not heard him. "Do you want to go with me, Dmitri? Nadya has seemed to be in a strange mood, though, for a very long time. I doubt if she is as amusing as she used to be."

He declined her invitation briefly. Thinking like this of Nadya was one thing; it was the single shining thread in this life. But if he were to meet her now, and find her plump, invidiously touched by the cares of maternity, he scarcely would be able to bear her thus or forgive himself for having seen her. "No," he said again and with superb melancholy, "I have not the heart to come between her and Michael." He touched his moustaches lingeringly. Silky and fine, those still remained to remind him of the handsome young manhood that had brought Nadya to his feet.

Augustina was thinking already of the journey, and with considerable trepidation. She was not as young as she was once, she said, and she could not expect to live forever. This visit would have to be made, for all things considered, Michael was still her nephew and had never grossly misused her love. Her very last days would be spent peacefully, in a convent, she swore, and the farther away from her relations it was, the better. Relations meant no more than friends these days. That feeling, however, was in all probability due to the rheumatic poison in her system. Thinking that Dmitri would leave, she arose, leaning on her stick. He waited and seemed to be extremely solicitous about any errands he might accomplish for her before she left the city. At last Augustina

understood his prolonged kindness and went to her desk. From that she took a packet and held it out to him.

"Will two thousand rubles be of some assistance to you until I return, Dmitri?"

"Oh, but really,—I had not expected you to do this," he said, and took his rubles blandly. A town house, his country estate, numberless hunting parties—all those things had depleted not only his father's fortune but Augustina's into the bargain. Dmitri possessed a flair for superior entertainment and it proved astoundingly expensive for one who had not yet received his general's decorations.

Wearily, Augustina walked to her bedroom to see about her packing. She was crippled with rheumatism in half of her body but it might be a long time before she died, and Dmitri seemed to be showing some impatience about the matter. Perhaps it was wise at times to give him sops amounting to two or three thousand rubles so that his face would not confess quite so much to her.

She wished that this foolish thing called rheumatism had crippled her legs less and made her eyes a little blinder.

If Augustina had wondered about her welcome from Nadya, she made no sign a fortnight later when her former charge kissed her dutifully at the door of her house. The kiss was a little fearful but there was real affection in it. "Nadya is not happy in this marriage," she concluded sharply, and suddenly her old eyes smarted. "I'm nearly dead," she said aloud, "and if Appa is still alive and able to move around better than I can, will she be good enough to bathe my feet?"

"Oh, but surely. And we are so glad you have come—Michael and I. We will have so many things to talk about."

"Lies," Augustina thought. "We will all of us die, never

having dared to tell the truth about our hearts." She leaned heavily on Michael's arm, so that she could more easily see his face. It was, indeed, a strong face. Not a bit like Dmitri's. . . . Leff, Dmitri, Feodor, Michael . . . Michael was the strongest of these. He seemed too old, now. Something weighed heavily on his heart. Nadya, probably. Always had that one weighed too much for her worth. But that was unkind. She had never judged Nadya kindly, as kindly as she deserved. Her eyes smarted again. She attempted to say facetiously, "Next year when I must be helped upstairs, I hope that Saint Peter will have a firmer hold on my arm than you, Michael." The tears did come then and at the head of the stairs Michael wiped her face and eyes. He scolded her for being a silly old aunt who thought it was smart to talk of the grave to her heirs who had more wealth now than was good for them.

Alexis would have scolded her in a similar fashion. Leff's widow looked for her handkerchief but she had lost her wallet. Michael loaned her two of his handkerchiefs and she wept into both of them. She felt better then, and was glad she had decided to come. But it was the first time in seven years, she said, that she had lost her wallet.

XXX

Appa was sitting in the kitchens. Of late she had taken to brooding in corners, and sometimes, not half hearing what was said, she would make remarks about her heart. It had begun a series of ridiculous jumpings in her body and one of these days it would jump clear into kingdom come. The number of her transgressions did not appall her, she stated, and she would never be able to convince Saint Peter of her virtues because of her tongue. It had never been what one might call a really respectable tongue.

Now Marta found herself repeating, "Appa! There are gypsies staying near us. I saw them. I—"

"You were singing a minute ago," Appa accused her. "'What was that you were singing?"

Marta puffed up with pride.

"I made it up. Out of my own head."

"I might have known it. Well, don't sing it any more. It's dreadfully stupid. And besides, there's no point to it."

"Oh, I suppose so," Marta conceded, depressed, and went out into the yard to play with Catherine who was a mysterious cat and a recent tenant of Michael's house. She had appeared importantly in Old Appa's kitchens with a kitten in her mouth, and then she went out but only to return with another. Successive journeys were made until five kittens were deposited in a basket that Appa and Marta found in a terrific hurry when it became apparent that the first entry was not to be the last. When the question of a name came up, Old Appa's contributions held no point of courtesy and limited themselves to Turnip, Old Stew, and similar appellations.

But Marta had been reading in Michael's library about a rather capable empress. She thought that it would be only decently complimentary to call this nice capable cat "Catherine." So duly named, Catherine stalked the house and farms as though everything had been of her own choosing. Her kittens were quite blind and Marta lived for the moment wherein they were to see their first light of day.

In the beginning she had been christened Marta Stephanie Leandra but by her seventh birthday the middle names were nearly forgotten although she sometimes drew all three initials on available mirrors with cakes of perfumed soap. The practice stopped abruptly after her beloved Catherine had adventured upon a letter and licked it, and made herself ill. Outside of herself and the speculative cat Marta considered other members of her family to be old, very old. Except, perhaps, Nadya.

While Nadya was her mother she seldom inspired a sense of consummate possession like Michael, and she had a most disconcerting habit of discouraging affectionate approaches if her child's hands were soiled or her neck not above suspicion. Michael never cared. And Nadya had a way of saying strange things to grown-ups, things that made them laugh or smile, or tell her she was a sophisticate, whatever that was. Marta supposed it meant a person who was like a river, not quite clear, with all the things on the bottom stirring. Neither was it clear to her why she should have that idea. It was very strange that whenever she thought of Nadya, her head became extremely confused. Now thinking of Michael never did that to her. It was all quite clear in her head about Michael.

And loving Nadya was wonderful but there was a hurt in it, something like eating delicious fruit, for when she ate to the heart of it, her teeth were hurt against a stone. But per-

haps she felt like that because Nadya didn't love her so very much in return. Love was a mean thing, Marta concluded. It wasn't even. That decision, however, failed to prevent her from paying adoring compliments.

"I want to grow up and look like you," she told Nadya often and serenely while she clutched her ankles and teetered forward on her cushion. It was a wholly unconscious tribute to Nadya that wherever she sat, Marta would soon appear with a fat cushion, a purple one by preference. After setting it down primly, she would seat herself in its middle and pull up regal corners until only her eyes showed, blinking and queerly enormous, like those of an owlet that were recently opened to the world and found it truly remarkable.

"No, don't look like me. Somehow life will cheat you." Nadya's reply always would be the same in effect although her words might be chosen differently, and she would smile, her slumbrous mouth curving to red dryad laughter.

While Marta adored her openly, there were times when adoration was tempered by something akin to hate. Those times were few and usually came after Nadya had said or done cruel things to Michael. And when Nadya neglected her it was Michael who took her in his arms and made her feel she was his universe. Marta had for him a vast affection, a thing that filled her breast and made it ache with undefined power. The moments when Nadya was hateful brought this power near to bursting. Marta would anchor herself to Michael's breast and hear the mute reproaches beating there. Her arms would hold him closely, their warmth appeasing him. Her small damp cheek against his red-bearded one, they would sit like that for hours and then, out of quiet and understanding they would talk.

Then there was Old Appa. Marta considered her ideas fascinating. In the first place Appa was immeasurably older than Michael and to hear her talk, one would be led to think

that she had lived forever. The picture of Old Appa's having lived forever in that shrivelled husk delighted her. Perhaps she had never managed to be a baby at all but always looked a gnome of an old woman. Perhaps at one time she had been as wonderful to look at as Nadya. But Marta dismissed this last thought for treachery; no one in the world could look as enchanting as Nadya. Poor Old Appa who had never owned beauty—it was really too bad. Even then in the latent green caverns of her mind Marta had built a Pantheon to Beauty.

When her games proved dull, she made it a point to ask questions of Appa because the answers provoked her imagination. For no particular reason once she wanted to know, "Why did they name me Marta? I think Marta is a stupid name. Why didn't they call me Nadya or something like that?"

Old Appa drew a stocking over her hand and analyzed its deplorable condition. Her eyes were not as good as they once were. And her heart could not bear very much more of anything, she thought.

"When you were born," she said quietly, "your mother was out of her head, what with one thing and another. And she began babbling about somebody named 'Martyn' who knew all about content. She made Michael promise to let you be named after this Martyn because she said it was the least she could do for him and perhaps you would know something about content. Your father didn't know what she was talking about but he promised. . . . He would have promised her anything." Old Appa's eyes dimmed but she went on. "I don't remember whether or not he ever asked her what it was all about. Probably not. He's wiser than most men."

Another day Marta said angrily in confidence, "I don't see why she says all those mean things to him. And she laughs at him. She hurts his feelings all the time and he never says anything to her. Why doesn't he say something to her?"

Old Appa gazed absently at the wall. "She's unhappy. He knows that. And he loves her."

"Well, she loves him, too. Doesn't she?"

"Of course," hastily. "Of course. Mothers and fathers always love each other, no matter what they say." To herself she added, "I hope I'm forgiven for that lie. It was necessary."

"Then why doesn't she ever let Michael talk to her when she's alone? She lets other men talk to her when they come here. She—"

"That will do. You are a terrible little girl to follow her around and listen the way you do! If you had a house and a great many men came to see you, what do you think that you would do? Would you say, 'Go on home, please, all of you. I want to talk to my husband!' Would you? You would have to receive your company and be nice to them, wouldn't you?"

Marta was unconvinced and inclined to be disagreeable, but only because she wanted to help Michael, and Appa, it seemed, was determined to prove such help altogether unnecessary. But Appa might be quite right about the matter. She was right so often.

"Well," she muttered, wavering, "when Michael's alone, she even keeps away from him. It hurts his feelings. I know it does. I asked him once."

"You did? What a child! What else did you ask him, pray? I guess you won't do nearly so much asking around this house now that your great-aunt Augustina's arrived! Wait till you see her. You will find out in no time that she can ask enough questions to do for all of us!"

But terror stood upright on Old Appa's sarcasms. It was not natural for small girls to see so much and know so much. Any child born of those two, however, was bound to put a curl of fright in one's hair. If Marta observed with such un-

canny ability now, what would she see later when her eyes were stronger? What a frightening gift to humans was this thing called life!

Old Appa found herself sighing. Only she had heard most of Nadya's delirious babblings at Marta's birth. Only her wise old ears had heard the tragic refrain of lips sagging with a buried agony.

Blue lines of fire, blue lines of fire forever dead, blue eyes of Feodor, Feodor!

XXXI

"MARTA," said Nadya, "this is your great-aunt Augustina."

"Yes," Marta offered politely, and then she remembered that Appa had told her to be sure and kiss the Princess Augustina's hand. She would expect it. But the warning had been thought of too late for the lady was looking at her very coldly.

"She's a very homely child," Augustina declared, "and her manners are obnoxious. She's not in the least like you, Nadya. You might have done better by maternity, it seems to me."

Nadya smiled faintly. "Perhaps. Yet she reminds me often of the child I must have been."

Marta disliked this disagreeable fat relation who didn't act at all the way a princess was supposed to act. Moreover, it was difficult not to be very afraid of her and the cane she walked with. There was something terrible about old ladies who leaned on canes. Marta felt she would not have been a bit surprised if great-aunt Augustina became angrier and angrier and suddenly began thumping her cane across people's shoulders. She waited, wide-eyed, but Augustina remained fairly peaceable, although from time to time she did give her small niece an unfriendly look.

At luncheon hour Marta found herself doing all the things calculated to upset a relative. Before they were seated at table she had stepped on Augustina's skirt and demolished a yard of expensive flouncing. In attempting to eat in a manner that would restore Augustina's good-nature, if she had ever had it, Marta mixed her manners and fingers and

found half of a glass of scalding tea in her lap while the other half made a huge stain on the linen before the grim lady. Then Marta's napkin ring incomprehensibly fell to the floor and in the attempt to retrieve it before her great-aunt noticed this latest fiasco, she heard an insidious rending sound, and sat bolt upright.

Augustina regarded her uncompromisingly.

"That was my dr—that was my underclothes," Marta explained apologetically. "They split."

It was the end of an appalling hour and she preferred being thoroughly dead.

Surprisingly, great-aunt Augustina laughed. She stared at Marta's pink countenance and waved her fork helplessly in the air, particularly when she realized that her embarrassed niece saw no amusement in the whole affair. To Nadya's better-tempered mirth she said, "I take it all back. She's a real child and may come to visit me in Saint Petersburg next winter."

Marta was relieved then. She wanted to know if there were many little girls in Saint Petersburg. There were not enough of them on Michael's estates so that she could play with any degree of fun. The ones that had been little last year managed to grow up and get married. And when little girls grew up and married, she observed, they didn't seem to want to play any more. It was too bad.

"Yes," said Augustina sympathetically, "but don't let me catch you growing up for a long time. I haven't had anyone to amuse me since your mother ran away from me. If you amuse me, I'll make you a present of a nice emerald every year. Do you like to hunt?"

"No, I can't bear to kill anything." Marta looked at this bloodthirsty relative with aversion.

"Well, then, do you want to be a general?"

Marta thought she was talking about games.

"No," she said mournfully. "Everybody wants to be the general. They never let me play general because I'm so small."

Augustina did not appear to be angry because of these negations. She returned to the interrupted feast before her and buttered her new cabbage lavishly.

"I believe I shall leave you my estates," she said.

Marta had finished her lunch and was glad to be excused immediately. Great-aunt Augustina might be a nice lady after all but the things she said didn't appear to make much sense.

Appa was rocking in her favorite corner with Catherine on her lap.

"Listen, Appa, can you hear me? I've been trying to tell you for nearly three days that the gypsies are camped near here." Marta had gone as closely to an old ear as Appa would allow. "I saw them. They looked perfectly wonderful."

"Yes, and you keep away from them," Appa ordered. "Because you will believe everything they tell you. They will go on about your being such a rich little girl and their being so poor, and the next thing you know you will be coming home without your shirt. That's what comes of feeling sorry for people like that. I know."

The prospect of returning without a shirt embarrassed Marta. To hide her confusion, she tried thinking of her great-aunt Augustina who laughed like a screech-owl and had emeralds.

"Just what do emeralds look like, Appa?"

"Emeralds? Oh, they're like that ruby your father gave your mother before they were married. Only they're green and much harder on your eyes." Then she added on inspiration, "They're a great deal like Catherine's eyes."

Marta peered into the cat's face. The green eyes in it were

green seas, deep, deeper than all the oceans Michael talked of, and they had a fashion of contracting as though a wind had blown through Catherine's head. Catherine blinked. The green seas vanished, leaving two panes of glass that were none too clear, and none too bearable to look at.

"Ooh," Marta said, shivering a little, "I don't think I want any emeralds. They fool you."

She went away with a thought that Old Appa had planted in her mind. Emeralds were deceitful but a ruby might be a great deal of fun. Once Nadya had said that a ruby was something like the vein of a man's heart. That seemed to make it quite valuable, especially if it were like part of Michael's heart.

"I've been looking over your things," she said candidly to Nadya later in the day, "and I want to know if I may borrow your ruby ring?"

"What?" looking at her child in consternation. "What do you want with rubies at your age?"

"I thought I'd like to play with it. I don't care for great-aunt Augustina's emeralds."

Nadya gave way to laughter on her bed. "I was—I used to be quite mad about them, myself," she admitted with difficulty. "You have an enormous advantage over me. Now Augustina never offered me any of them. Perhaps I admired them too much."

"May I have your ring?"

"No, madam. You're a tiny imbecile. That ring is worth more than anything you may ever own. And it needs to be reset. I intend to put it where it won't be quite so accessible to your admiration."

"Oh, I think you're unkind."

"And I think that you will have plenty of time to wear your rubies later, if you study your books well!"

In the refusal of the ring Marta lost the significance of

Nadya's remark. She retreated to her play yard and meditated with her soul but the struggle for higher thoughts could not compete with the mental picture of Nadya's jewel. It should look perfectly beautiful if she held it in her hand under the surface of the pond.

Several hours later Marta found an opportunity to take the ring. Apparently Nadya had forgotten her threat to hide it. The child's fingers played about the heavy silver circlet with its enmeshed jewel. How beautiful was its buried winking fire! Like Nadya. Queer she had not thought before this that such a ring would be owned only by Nadya. Still entranced by the great drop of imprisoned blood, Marta took it to the pond. Nadya had told her that if she studied her books, she could have rubies. Well, she would study very hard, indeed. After all, learning things out of Michael's books was not so difficult.

She noticed that the middle finger of her right hand where the circlet fitted best—Nadya had such delicate hands—was rather grubby. In fact, both of her hands were abominably dirty. It was silly to expect a royal ruby to look well on them as they were. Hiding them under the water would help a little. . . . The ring still on her finger, Marta thrust her hand into the pond.

The jewel glowed in the water and Marta bent her head to see new magic there, but in an appalling second the catastrophe happened:

The stone quivered in its silver setting, winked once, and was gone. The ruby was gone. Nadya's ruby!

Stunned, she allowed her hand to rest in the water. It felt good to . . . oh, Nadya would be furious now and beat her. She might even be hateful always. . . . Marta peered into the pond.

There was something distinctly horrible in the fact that whenever she loved, something seemed to happen to her for

the loving. She loved Nadya who cared only for her jewels. She loved the ruby and that had slipped wickedly to the bottom of the world. She loved Michael. He was altogether satisfactory but she couldn't feel that way about anyone else. In a fashion she loved Old Appa, but Appa was very ugly and wasn't likely to surprise her by vanishing into a pond, or anywhere at all.

Marta crept to her bed and wept. Nothing was of more importance in life than that a ruby, which had once lain on a finger of an alleged descendant of an alleged empress of all the Russias, had winked itself to the bottom of a wretched old pond. And there would be the devil to pay.

Nadya returned from a party on a neighboring estate in a swirl of glinting color. Her Chinese coat enwrapped her slim body like a sheath and above its straight hard glory was the ash gold of her hair, ever too beautiful, too flagrant, and the slanting deep gold of her eyes. She was a dream of fair women to Marta who sat in her nightdress on a purple cushion near the door and rocked back and forth, hands clasping her knees. Nadya swayed down to her for a brief caress.

"Chit, so I am beautiful to you this night?"

"Yes, but there's an awful spot on your shoe."

"A spade is a spade but a lady's shoe is a slipper. You must remember that. And the spot is excellent wine."

"Will it come out?"

"Who cares? And I'll give you this coat when you grow up, if you promise to do it justice. At this moment you are an astoundingly plain little girl. I may be wronging you, however. Perhaps you have intentions of startling the world. Would you really like to have this coat?"

"Yes," moodily, "but by the time I grow up, you'll wear it out. I know you. You always ruin the things that I like,

and that you like, for that matter. What did you have to eat? Didn't Michael go with you?"

"Marvellous things to eat. And Michael didn't go because he thought your great-aunt Augustina chaperone enough. I didn't press my invitation on him. What did you have to eat? I hope you didn't bother Appa too much. She's so tired. We must be easier with her."

"Oh, I didn't eat anything. Couldn't."

"What was the matter? Sick, poor baby?"

"I wish I was dead," said Marta miserably. And at Nadya's light laugh, "I—I lost—I lost your ruby!"

There. The awful truth was out. The tears were running freely down her cheeks. Her hands clutched at her throat so that her heart might not escape.

"What? Are you in your right mind?" Marta's frozen little face answered her. "When did you lose it?" Nadya's voice was trembling. Since Marta's birth the ruby had been a symbol of her first and only loyalty to Michael. Now it seemed that in losing it, she had lost everything. Feodor had made her his brother's enemy. And Marta had broken the last link of her tolerance. Hardly knowing what she said, she demanded furiously, "When did you lose it? Answer me!"

"This afternoon. I didn't dare tell you. I told Michael. He and Igor looked for it . . . but . . . Igor can't see anything."

"And they haven't found it, of course."

"No."

"I told you not to touch it, didn't I?"

Nadya was coming toward her like a cat, her eyes unrecognizable. Beneath that angry fire Marta felt she must be burned alive. She screamed madly, a high thin sound.

"Please don't, Nadya . . . please! Oh, I didn't mean to lose it. I didn't mean to . . . Michael! *Michael!*"

To the small weeping figure on the floor it seemed that she

had died and waited long years before Michael came and lifted her to his arms.

Hours later Nadya still wept:

"The only thing you ever gave me that I really wanted, loved!"

He regarded her curiously, somberly.

". . . thousands of rubles lost to satisfy a brat's caprice. And you struck me for chastising her. You struck me!"

"You were killing her. She loved you too much to tell you that." Michael's eyes were dull with the blindness of a passion of anger too great to be endured. He saw again that other primitive portrait of himself turning upon his brother. "Blood brothers," Feodor had said, and then there was the closing of a dungeon door. Red madness before death. Feodor dead.

"You struck me!" (God damn you.)

Feodor had cried that, too, before he cursed him.

"He probably will," had been his answer to Feodor who was dead. Feodor. Blood brothers. God, God but men were moles, burrowing in the blackness called life . . . moles, rats. Rats to be trapped in dungeon doors!

"Oh, you struck me."

A song of hate. That was Nadya's song of hate. Because of Feodor who had died. Hate always, now. Oh, God, but he loved her, loved her, *loved her.*

The words coiled in his head like small serpents striking through the heads of others . . . blood brothers! . . . feeding upon the thing that was his brain.

"Oh, Nadya," he was weeping in the blackness, a mole burrowing toward the thing that was his life, "come back to me! I love you so! I love you so!"

But another serpent head, darting:

"Never. Never. Lost to me forever. Nadya never has been mine."

BOOK SEVEN

GOD HAS NO TEARS; HE IS TOO TIRED

XXXII

He knelt beside her bed. All enmity lay dead between them. At last he had said, "You have never loved anyone but Feodor." Never had he meant to taunt her with that for what had been between those two belonged to her own memory and he had wanted to be kind. She talked incoherently of the ruby, and remorsefully of Marta until, realizing her shame, he told her to lie still. Marta would forgive them both.

"You are too good, Michael," Nadya said. "Except for what you did to Feodor, you have been too much like God for me to have loved you like a man." She thought, "It would be nearly easier for me to love Martyn, rather than you, my poor Michael."

"Nadya! And was your Feodor such a man?" Again he had betrayed himself, and her, and Feodor who was dead. He begged, "Forgive me for that sin."

She turned her face away. "Am I like God to you that I can forgive you Feodor?"

"You are like God to me."

"True." Her eyes were desolate. They said, "Yet the stars that I have wished for were never anything but dust to my longings."

His head lay in forlorn grief across her hands.

"God pity us, Nadya. Is it for this that we have lived our lives?"

His muted lips swept to her fingers as her whisper touched his hair. Anguished, she thought, "I have lived my life for one kiss and that one, Feodor's. Dead, he has destroyed me more than if he had lived." Her fingers found Michael's,

pressed them. He had lived for her true love and there was no need to hurt him further now. No need to tell him now that until she had beaten her child for a jewel and been shamed, she always would have wanted to believe that Feodor stood screaming between their arms. Fiercely she had wished to keep Feodor alive in her heart to keep Michael's arms from ever reaching for her again. In that cruel division there had been irretrievable loss, made apparent now in his forgiving tenderness and in his tears that fell on her hands. Perhaps they were God's tears. But that was a silly biblical idea. God? *God has no tears; He is too tired.*

"I love you, Nadya. I shall always love you."

She said softly, "Once there was a monk who one day mocked the glittering embroideries on the altar, and said that God needed no such pretties for His worship, so his brother monks threw him out and bolted the monastery gate. I came upon him lying in a ditch and laughing. 'Why do you laugh so?' I said. 'Because I am wise,' he answered. 'Because God loves a happy man and a happier monk. Anyone can be unhappy. Anyone can be a spiritual coward and need gold altar cloths to entice him to prayer. I laugh. I can rise to laughter at the world, and the world is mine!' . . . So, don't weep for me, please, Michael, even if I have laughed but to break our hearts. Forgive me, if you love me still."

He had taken her hands and pressed them against his lips as he had held them once before, held them truly as though the world could end and he would never let them go.

XXXIII

Old Appa never awoke from her sleep. The world took care of the very young like Marta. No one took care of the very old. However long one's span of years, however merrily one might laugh, and however bravely one might speak, life was a succession of evils that the soul bent under. Prayer was heavy and the soul bent under that, too. There was no escape from sorrow while one lived. So she fell into troubled sleep and in the night when Michael dreamed that she was ill, he went to her door.

"Appa. Appa?"

The tart old mouth had softened incredibly.

"Appa! Why don't you answer me?"

Perhaps Old Appa had thought once again of saying her prayers backward and became so involved that the deity to whom she prayed had ended her predicament in pity.

Appa was asleep. Michael had said that Appa was very tired and intended never to awake. That meant that Appa was dead. Poor Appa. Marta wished that she had not plagued her with so many questions. Poor Old Appa. Just last night she had said, "Get into bed, now. . . . That wasn't very satisfactory. Kiss me again, my little cabbage. Your mother is heartbroken because she hurt you. She will make that up to you. I know her. You will see. . . . There! Good-night, little pumpkin."

Soundlessly, Marta slipped down from the wall. She was weeping, her face crushed into the earth.

For two hours she had sat on the play yard wall with the covered basket of kittens and Catherine who was in a playful mood one moment and dreaming with her eyes open in the next. Her tail switched restlessly and Marta felt that Catherine's motherhood was irksome to her.

A gypsy came through the beet fields. He stopped at the basket and looked into it with interest.

"It's a nice afternoon for kittens to be in the sun," he said in a friendly fashion.

"Yes," Marta agreed, watching Catherine out of one eye.

"I visited this place once before," he went on, almost pleading for her attention, "and I played with two boys. I can't remember their names just now. Their father was a wonderful old man. We had quite a time in the family dungeon. I hope you never play there?"

"Dungeon?" Her eyes were blank. Old Appa had never said anything about a dungeon. And she had not said anything about one of the gypsies being crazy, either.

"It's just as well," he said, half to himself. "Well, all that was a long time ago."

"Yes," Marta answered absently. "Lots of people live here."

Once more she was absorbed by the kittens. The gypsy had a nice face and some people might think he was very handsome. Appa had said yesterday that it was time for the kittens to open their eyes, if they ever intended to do anything about it. Opened, their eyes would look like blueberries, she had said. Now that was a ghastly idea. Marta hoped Old Appa had been wrong. It would be terrible to look at the kittens' eyes later and think of them floating in a dish of cream.

The man was asking her name.

"Marta," she answered politely, "and I'm seven." She stirred uneasily. "And I was named for a man who knew all

about content," she was going to add but it was too much trouble. It was altogether too hot an afternoon for extended conversation and Catherine was likely at any moment to awaken to her responsibilities.

The Lizard's son walked away slowly. He had felt like paying a friendly call but apparently there were no old acquaintances here. These old estates like their barons were vanishing. That was a nice little girl on top of the old wall. She was an appealing little thing in spite of her swollen nose, and looked as though she might have been crying for a long time. He thought of someone else who had looked like that on first meeting. Nadya. But that was a million years ago.

He felt distressingly old. Perhaps he might feel better if he could make himself weep a little, but there was no reason for tears. A spot in the yard reminded him of his first visit when he had seen a lash in the hands of a wonderful old man. But it was difficult now to recapture the glee he had felt upon seeing that whip rising and falling in smooth strokes on the hide of one who at the time seemed assuredly to have deserved it. Somewhat to his surprise, the Lizard's son remembered fully the words of the song he had sung:

> **"Oh, the Devil he sat on an old dung heap,**
> **And he wept, 'This is just what we Devils reap,**
> **The last of man and the last of sheep;**
> **It's a stupid end for a poor Devil's keep!' "**

sang Martyn, softly, sadly, as though he really felt sorry about something.

But Marta looked after him disapprovingly.

"That's a dreadful song," she told Catherine who did not appear to be affected one way or another. "And besides, there's no point to it."

Catherine saw that her own philandering was at an end.

Her children were ready to see the light and they mewed ceaselessly, their closed eyes trembling. She put her dreams behind her and began licking at the twitching eyelids, carefully, so that they could not see too much of the world at once. It might frighten them.

There was considerable point to that.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IN A LETTER to her publishers, the author writes: "Jean Stark was born Michaelina Marfa-Moya Namovich, only daughter of Baron Michael Kassimir Namovich of St. Petersburg in old Russia. At the time of her birth she was expected to arrive as a son but even then showed a disposition to thwart relatives. In spite of her bald and parboiled little head, her parents became reconciled and could hardly wait to grow curls on it.

"For personal and political reasons Jean's parents fled Russia when she was about seven months old. There were a number of days before the border was safely reached when Jean and her mother traveled in a peasant's cart and had to be hidden under a load of straw, beets and potatoes. Jean never screamed once, thereby proving perspicacity and a spirit sensitive to danger and drama. But she admits that her discretion might have been due to too many potatoes on the chest.

"She is married now to a tall Irishman who has given her part of the coast of Maine. PHANTOM IN THE WINE was written on the Maine coast, in a grove of balsam and old pines. Mica rocks rose to the right and a broad shining sea to the left with white sails running before the wind."

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